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THE WINGS OF THE MORNING

Opinions of the Press.

Love the Player

Morning Post.—"Apart altogether from the tragic plot there is much to admire in this novel. The scenes of Irish life are vividly sketched. The matter of the story is to be commended; so also is the manner. The language is clear and well-chosen. There is none of those banalities of sentiment or highly coloured word-paintings which render half the novels of the present day so wearisome. Mrs. Savile has produced a well-imagined, consistent, and impressive novel, which will be widely read and with keen appreciation."

Irish Times.—"In *Love the Player* we have a strong story, not a weak one. There are two things to be said about the book: first, the writer has a vigorous control of style and equally in description, and in developing a situation is clear, pungent, and powerful."

Yorkshire Post.—"In Helen V. Savile we have a new writer possessed of strong sympathies, and no little descriptive and constructive power, and a wide outlook."

Bristol Times.—"A really well-written story."

A Poor Buffer

Scotsman.—"Is about a lovable and larky little Irish girl, who is wooed by a soldier lad who dies for her."

Irish Times.—"The scene of the story is laid on the coast of Donegal, which gives Mrs. Savile ample opportunity of displaying her acquaintance with the Celtic peasant—his eccentricities, his mysticisms, his imaginative faculties, and his quaint humour."

The World.—"Characterised by much daintiness of expression and some tender thought."

Literature.—"A powerful story of Irish peasant life—of a wild people in a wild country."

Western Morning News.—"A brilliant little Irish sketch."

Publisher's Circular.—"A very beautiful piece of work."

London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., Ltd.

THE
WINGS OF THE MORNING

BY
HELEN V. SAVILE
Author of "Love the Player," "A Poor Buffer," etc.



London :
SWAN SONNENSCHN & CO., LTD.

1901

TO
LILITH AND JACK,
•
WITH
THEIR MOTHER'S LOVE.

CONTENTS

CHAP.	PAGE.
I. "LE JEU EST FAIT,"	9
II. A WOMAN'S PASTIME,	11
III. THE SPELL OF THE NIGHT,	20
IV. A DANCE TO HONOUR THE DEAD,	27
V. SHREDDED SHEETS,	39
VI. THE DEATH DAY,	44
VII. A SUBTLE SCHEME,	56
VIII. ANGELA'S ADVANCES,	65
IX. A PERILOUS PAUSE,	74
X. A TIME OF TENSION,	82
XI. FEVERISH FANCIES AND UGLY REALITIES,	94
XII. THE RAPTURE OF REALISATION,	107
XIII. RAYS OF LIGHT IN TIRED EYES,	117
XIV. PLAGUE SPOTTED PETALS,	123
XV. PRINTHORPE'S APOLOGY,	133
XVI. THE SILVER COIN WITH SCARLET LETTERS,	140
XVII. THE ZINGARI RIBBON,	153
XVIII. A GOLDEN SUNDAY,	163
XIX. THE SWORD OF PAIN,	171
XX. VASHON'S DIPLOMACY,	179
XXI. THE WHEELS OF GREAT JUGGERNAUT'S CAR,	186
XXII. DERBY DAY,	198
XXIII. MARGARET CRAVEN'S SELF-TAUGHT LESSON,	206
XXIV. ROMA, MY ROMA !	216
XXV. AN ANSWER TO A BURNING QUESTION,	226
XXVI. BITTER SWEET,	240
XXVII. THE WINGS OF THE MORNING,	253

THE WINGS OF THE MORNING

CHAPTER I

LE JEU EST FAIT

"Le jeu est fait."

2 The gaunt hand crept surreptitiously forward to plunk a coin on the taut green cloth visible only to the dying eyes of the old gambler; and as the imaginary ball rattled round the fictitious wheel, his fingers picked fitfully at the threadbare blanket.

"Numero dix-neuf, rouge paire et passe."

There was such intensity of disappointment in the rasping, faltering voice that the girl, cowering over the few live embers of a scanty fire, rose and came towards the bed.

"Father, it's late, lie down and rest a little."

But again the coppers were planked down upon the blanket, and for an hour the ghastly game went on accompanied by the muttered rambling ejaculations.

"Numero quinze, noir, impair et manque."

Both hands now groped for the gold that was not there, and greedily gathered in the coppers staked again and again.

"Sleep now, father, rest for a little while."

The second appeal reached his dulled senses.

"Wine," he whispered. "I'm weak to-night."

She gave him the last few drops, he drained them

eagerly, and then with feeble passion pushed away the glass.

It was wretched stuff! It was a wretched hotel! His eyes, over which the death mists gathered thickly, glanced round the garret. He would send for the manager and tell him that his prices were exorbitant, his ménage a scandal! They would go to the Hotel de Paris, now immediately. It was nearer to the Casino, and the Blue Hungarian Band played there nightly. Hark! he could hear it now, hear it distinctly.

Then he fell into semi-unconsciousness, and the girl with a sigh groped her way back towards the small spark of light that glowed from the fire; she nursed it, fanned and cared for it, till fingers of flame crept over the poor room.

A voice, harsh and unlovely, forced its way up from the squalid London street through the cracks of the ill-fitting window frame, and the girl rose up with a shudder and looked out into the gloom. The flaring lights from a gin-shop revealed a coarse and loathsome looking woman standing singing on the pavement. A passer by pushed money into her outstretched hand and the voice ceased; the woman reeled into the gin-shop, and the door swung to behind her. Then the girl, watching from above, pressed her hand over her eyes as though to shut out the horrible sight.

"Not that, ah God! Not that," she sobbed and crept back to the fire-light.

The flames leaped higher, lighting up the garret that sheltered her; playing upon the bottle from which even the dregs of the thin red wine had been drained; upon the broken bread, that stood between her and sheer starvation, and over the face of the father who now lay dying there upon the pallet bed.

Again she went over to the window. Must she do this thing? She would hide in the shelter of the shadows; they would cover the shame of her face.

Ah God! it had come to that.

CHAPTER II

A WOMAN'S PASTIME

The man stood before his picture. His face expressed nothing of the artist's satisfaction in his handiwork, rather a keen sense of failure and disappointment.

Yet the picture was nobly planned. Night still enshrouded the grim blocks of buildings in the background; in the foreground a bold sweep of river; and against the low wall that imprisoned the murky waters crouched the figure of a woman. The tragedy of the fallen was stamped on every line of her; the face was hidden, as with uplifted arm she screened her eyes from the gaze of the angel standing beside her. The faint greyiness of dawn was creeping through the night darkness, and from the pale East fingers of light pointed towards the white presence.

Perfect in detail, entirely harmonious in colouring, yet the picture gave little pleasure to the man whose hand had traced it, whose heart had conceived it. Drawing nearer, he scanned the angel's face intently; stepping back a pace, with troubled eyes he looked at it.

"In my dreams I see her clearly, but when I awake she eludes me and I lack all power of recalling her. In the flesh I shall never see her, for my ideal does not walk this world."

Then with a frown that stole away something of the charm of his most charming face, he drew a curtain across the picture, and left the studio.

In another room, seeking the least lonely place when one is alone, Stephen Printheorpe paused before a blazing fire which set shafts of multi-coloured lights leaping over the spoils of every age and clime that were grouped together with a glaring disregard of affinity. On the walls, Murillo's Madonna hung beside the Irish Derby winner; the popular Master of the Louth Hounds had place between Anna the prophetess, and a dancing Dervish; Queen Eleanor, pleading for the lives of the citizens of Calais, was suspended above a Rubens group of indolent white-limbed loves, and below an autograph crayon of Tod Sloane. Bear, tiger, and snowy angora skins were flung over couches and scattered upon a subtle-toned carpet from Scind. Potteries, porcelains, images of silver and curios of gold, racing cups and a motley selection of books were grouped upon the tables, and a homely tobacco jar sundry pipes and a box of "Bryant and May's" in its unlovely yellow nakedness, lay upon the cunningly carved ebony over-mantel.

The room bore the stamp of originality and of disregard for the conventions of art and society that indicated an owner with world-wide experience, but no guiding principle of life. There was a sense of incongruity about the hap-hazard arrangement, a want of homeliness, as apart from mere comfort, that showed the world-citizen rather than the man, and made the place a head-quarter, and rallying-point, not an abiding place. The utter absence of a woman's touch proclaimed the lonely man; but above all, there was an arrested look, as if a scheme of existence had been hotly pursued to a given point, and had suddenly stopped there and lost its meaning for ever.

But the many jarring notes did not distress the artist, who was, however, not responsible for them; his own familiar friend had gathered them, and they gave him a feeling of companionship and spoke of him in his absence.

To-night only the fire-flames lit up the large room, and Printhorpe lay back luxuriously, and listlessly watched the play of the fitful light upon the walls and ceiling, detaching objects from the engulfing gloom, flushing the gleaming brightness of the Cnidian Venus and burnishing the grotesque god of beaten brass that faced her. But it seemed as though the light loved best to play upon the living beauty of the man whose thoughts now drifted so idly that they scarcely took definite shape.

In the days that belonged to the past Stephen Printhorpe's school friends had christened him "Dolly," not because he was frail or effeminate, but because his eyes were very blue, his hair very bright and his face altogether fair. But the muscles in the lad's long limbs were very well developed, his pluck was undoubted, and undue liberties with "Dolly" were rarely taken and invariably regretted. Time stole nothing of youth's comeliness, and in the pride of his manhood Stephen Printhorpe was uncommonly pleasant to look upon.

Outside the winter wind made much ado, even the din of Piccadilly was drowned in the riot of sound; for God had sent out his messengers at dawn of day, and the winds, let loose from bondage, sped furiously over the face of the earth. Sweeping through high pasture lands and low, they dashed giant trees upon the breast of the mother who had nurtured them as weak saplings, they stirred up strife at sea, and men's hearts failed for fear when the Æolian cry of the tempest shrilled in the rigging of the vessels that held their quaking bodies.

Down in the depths of the grey green waters, weird goblin creatures peered curiously into the sightless eyes of the strange new-comers that lay so white, silent and inert upon the ooze of the great sea bed. In the city the winds lost something of their strength; vainly they hurled themselves against the blocks of brick and stone that resisted them; baffled they swept through busy

streets; shrieking for admittance they thundered against securely closed windows; then shrieks gave way to sobs and it seemed as though feeble phantom fingers tapped nervously against the window-panes.

Crossing the room Printhorpe drew aside the curtain and looked out into the storm-tossed night; its passion muffling all other sound, he started as a hand was laid on his shoulder.

"Neil! by all that's good! Why, I didn't expect you back till to-morrow."

"Shouldn't have come if a note forwarded to me from the Club hadn't reminded me of an engagement that I wish to Heaven I'd had the chance of forgetting. Give me consolation, Stephen, and a good measure of approbation."

"The best I have is always yours; anyhow the approbation is a dead certainty."

Neil Vashon's voice was solemn and his face grave.

"Stephen, I'm let in for a dinner-party to-night, and what's even worse, for the ball that follows it."

"Bless my soul!"

"I'd gladly bless your soul and body also if you'd get me off the festivity with decency, not that you'd find my benediction much catch."

"Be ill, very ill, influenza."

"No good, met my host at the Carlton not ten minutes ago."

"Go mad, raving."

"Well, I must have been that when I accepted the invitation and it didn't choke off my hostess."

"But what possessed you to accept it. There's precious little potter's clay about you, so it must have had some attraction."

"Well, to tell the truth, there's a little girl."

"A little what?" shouted Printhorpe.

"Not a little what, but a little girl, a Miss Patty Prendergast and—"

Impetuously Printhorpe interrupted.

"And not a week ago you swore that there wasn't a woman in all God's earth that you would cross the road to meet, nor one you would cross it to avoid, and now . . ." He stared moodily into the darkness and drummed his knuckles upon the glass. Quickly his mood changed. "Neil, I'm a selfish brute, 'pon my soul I deserve kicking. Dear old man, honestly I wish you luck, but just at first it came as a bit of a shock."

Vashon laughed long before he answered; it was many a day since he had shewn such genuine mirth.

"It's a shock you'll rally from quickly; but what with you cursing and congratulating inside, and the wind howling outside, I don't get much chance of a hearing. Anyhow, the courtly sentiments I aired last week stand equally good now."

"Thanks be for that! I believe I'd almost as soon lose the use of my hands and be forced like the Antwerp fellow to paint with my toes than know that some Delilah had run her scissors through your locks."

"If that exploit hangs on the downfall of my celibacy there'll be no need for you to worry your toes. However, the damsel who decoyed me into this trap is a simple little soul, scarcely out of her school-room."

"I hae me doots' about the simplicity," laughed Stephen.

"Well, even if she has a dash of the Delilah, it wouldn't amuse her to clip my grey locks; she looks on them as such cobwebs of antiquity that she confided to me all her silly little sorrows; said she had been severed from the lad she loved, and seemed fairly certain she would die unless she could meet him to-night. She babbled a lot about her mother's high opinion of me, that part made me grin a bit, and then she implored me to use my influence, towards getting her to this confounded festivity. The parent bird was sweeter than honey in the comb, and vowed she'd gratify the infant if I would dine with them and join their party for the ball. Here she was flint and I was

refusing with more speed than civility when I caught the pleading in Miss Patty's eyes, and suddenly something in them reminded me of other eyes, my sister's, for hers also were soft, and dark, and so beseeching."

Vashon's voice faltered, he lit a cigarette and let the glow grow grey.

"I understand," said Printhorpe simply.

A moment there was silence, till Vashon spoke impatiently.

"I clean forgot my idiocy, until this morning's post brought me a rose-coloured reminder reeking with scent. Imagine me at a dance! Why it's years upon years since I have perpetrated such a folly. The last time . . ." Quickly pulling the check string of his speech he gave a mirthless laugh. "Well, it's of little moment, I've got to get rid of time, and after all it's only a rather more than usually dreary way of doing it."

"Neil, that's a poor way to look at things, the poorest. For my part I think active misery would be preferable to coma and indifference to life; I think that such numbing paralysis would out-weigh all the tortures of a burning hell upon earth."

"The numbness mostly follows the torture you allude to so glibly. Hell below is described as a place of unending torment. As yet I have not been there, but I have an intimate acquaintance with the one above, and as I fancy it would be bad to beat, I owe a debt of gratitude to the paralysis which took me out of it." For a moment in silence he searched a bitter past. "It was a woman's pastime that drove me into it," he added with teeth clenched tight.

As Printhorpe looked at the powerful figure that dwarfed his own height, at the granite-hewn face, the stern set mouth and the deep grey eyes, he began to understand why the happy light that in past days had shone in them at all times, was now so rarely rekindled, and speech broke hotly from his lips.

"Is it possible that a woman dared play with the love that a man such as you would give her?"

"Stephen, I thanked God upon my knees—I was young then, and had kept some old beliefs,—when a woman accepted the great love I gave so gladly. She played with it for a long time, so carefully, so prettily that I, poor fool, thought her big toy pleased her, and as to her ever breaking it, why I trusted her as a child trusts God. But it's a hackneyed every day story, I'm only one of the many thousand dolts whose hearts a woman has danced on. Well, she danced on mine and the devil fiddled away for her, till the time came for her to lay in the store of purple and fine linen suitable for the wife of a needy subaltern. I doubt if it was afterwards considered good enough for the wife of the Jew boy who bought her. She wrote me a very pretty note, it was blotched with tears, probably fetched from the water jug; it told me that she loved me too well to drag me down to poverty and then—then I think I went mad. I chucked up my commission and scoured the length and breadth of the earth, till the merciful numbness you call paralysis, took charge of me, and when you and I met again, the Neil Vashon you had known was dead."

"Curse the jade!"

"No, no, Stephen, thank her. Long ago I learned to feel deeply indebted to her, and now I am as indifferent to her as to every other specimen of her sex."

"Well, for my part I have neither desire to trust, nor cause to misdoubt them. I have painted women by the score, from dainty duchesses to the model who sits for daily bread. I have caught the shade of blue eyes, hazel, and brown. I have touched soft lovely limbs and draped the human form divine, but I have never for one moment felt that they were otherwise than effigies helpful to my art, and if only I could once paint my ideal's haunting face, the breadth of the

World, for all I'd care, might then come between us. The ways of women are a closed book I have not the smallest desire to read."

"You are fortunate. I read the book and could have sworn that I understood it, and the more I looked at them, the more I loved the pictures that were in it, but I suppose my senses were dull and it was far too deep for me."

"Neil, I fancy the Israelite's claim would weigh lightly; has she never since thrown you flies?"

Perhaps the other's thoughts were fixed on other things, or perhaps the question asked that which even his friend should not be told, for it was never answered, and when Vashon spoke again, a subdued passion in his voice gave the lie to complete paralysis of soul.

"Stephen, there remains a bitter memory that cannot die till I do, but I would not have it dead. It is the memory of the neglect of the poor little patient sister, who loved me with a love that gave all and asked nothing back. It was seldom that I gave a thought to her, although I was the only one she had belonging to her, and it was years before I suddenly decided that I would pick up my bits of broken life and make a home for her. By that time the money I so little expected had come to me, enough to have satisfied the Jew boy's bargain, and I hurried home, just stopping here and there to collect some carvings, china and other riff-raff that might possibly amuse her. 'Pon my word it gave me quite an interest to rig up this house thinking that she'd find it cheerier than the big barrack in the country, and it positively amused me to daub all this trash about as best I could," Vashon glanced swiftly round the room, "and when the day came that I set off to fetch her, thinking of her glad surprise I grew almost happy—but you know the rest."

"Yes, I know," said Printhorne gently, "when you got there they told you she was dead."

"She was dead," echoed Vashon half aloud and unconsciously stretched out hands that seemed as if they sought to stroke a small face with eyes that had grown weary of watching.

For a while only storm-fret disturbed the silence and the reflected fire-flames crossed and re-crossed a face that grew very stern as the sadness slipped away from it. Moving away from the window Vashon switched on a blaze of electric light that spoilt the fire-flames' play.

"Well, I've landed myself in a lively mood for the coming festivity, and dash it all! why it's time I dressed for it. I shall be back before midnight, as I shall certainly cut the ball immediately after I get to it."

"Always supposing the giver of it will let you."

"Oh, that's all right, for there are hundreds of givers giving it to themselves, and after they have had their money's worth of fun the change is to go towards building a Gordon memorial. Heavens above! Is the idea roaringly funny, or pitifully pathetic? My poor old chief Gordon, I wonder how he would have liked the notion of a mob of humanity eating, drinking and cutting capers with a view to raising an erection to his memory."

"Not much, I fancy, but their cackle won't disturb him; if ever a man deserved rest he did, and doubtless he has got it."

The Sèvres clock struck seven.

"I must be off," said Vashon, and he laughed.

"I'm away to the ham and the jam and the devil of a cram."

CHAPTER III

THE SPELL OF THE NIGHT.

Stephen Printhorpe had readily agreed to share the home prepared for the girl that had not needed it. A studio in London was a necessity for his pursuit of art, and though the foul fog-fiend's breath might have fallen less heavily in regions beyond Piccadilly, the attraction of his friend's society outweighed all objections. Vashon's goodly heritage offered scope for indulging in the sporting instincts which the two men held in common, but the iron had entered his soul, the sportsman's joy of killing was dead, and a rare day's sport excited him as little as no scent or wild birds dejected him. He neither sought, nor repelled acquaintances, and when the exactions of art tied Printhorpe for any length of time to London, he invariably joined him. Both men had gold, enough and to spare, neither had immediate relations to grieve, or please.

That his friend's peace of mind had been ruined, Printhorpe had long since surmised, and that one of Eve's daughters had worked that ruin, chance words had easily suggested, but that she had done so wantonly was a crime with which he would scarcely have accredited the worst of them. That he had heard the story for the first time to-night, did not strike him as strange. Men seldom strip off the leaves that shadow their soul's secrets. Women ventilate their dark places more readily, and so many leaves get whirled away on the breath of "strict secrecy" that in time nothing

remains but the bare branches through which the prying eyes of the world may peer at pleasure.

"Thy friend has a friend. Thy friend's friend has a friend. Therefore speak sparingly."

- But assuredly it was not from lack of love or want of faith that Vashon had hitherto withheld the story of what had marred his life, though he himself could not have accounted for the impulse which had prompted him to break the silence on that storm-tossed night.

Lying back in the depths of his chair, with hands clasped behind his handsome head, with heels high upon the jamb of the fireside, and his pipe sending strong rings of tobacco-smoke beyond Tod Sloane, who would have loved them, right into the face of St. Anna, who might have loathed them, Stephen Printhorpe let his thoughts drift back to the days when he and Neil Vashon had first sealed their friendship. Days at Wellington College where Neil's strong individuality, wholesome influence, and ready helping hand had guided him past the pitfalls that exist in the great world of school. Days at Woolwich where together they had prepared for the same profession. But Vashon had adhered to the life he loved so well, while he had soon exchanged his sword for a painter's palette. Then came a long uninterrupted break; and he had gone through thirty years of life, and Neil four years further, before their paths crossed in the wilds of Northern India, he seeking fresh fields for his imagination in the gorgeous East where the colours of life are stronger, the shadows deeper, and the issues simpler; the other, having exorcised the devil of unrest that so long had dogged him, was making ready to retrace his steps homeward, the richer by the accession of a great fortune, the poorer by the loss of many of the lovable qualities which had so specially characterized him.

Not every soul gains purification in the fire of burning pain; some, the smoke of the furnace tarnishes and they become lack-lustre.

Outside, the storm-winds made mad music, a chorus of strange concord that scaled louder as the hours drew on, losing count and control in its passion. Then the wild winds would fall back, and hush their riot as though they listened to a voice which, creeping apart from the angry clamours, sobbed and moaned as if sorry for the ruin wrought upon the world.

To-night, time sped swiftly while Printhorpe's mind retraced the past, and he took no heed of the whims of the storm-winds. Standing up, he leaped back against the mantel-shelf, savagely gnawed his fair moustache, and hated the woman who had been his friend's undoing.

"'Tis an awkward thing to play with souls, and matter enough to save one's own," he said to himself slowly. His glance lingered upon the gleaming figure of the Cnidian Venus and half aloud he spoke to the white-limbed goddess.

"Perhaps Praxiteles broke his heart over the living women from whom he chiselled you; but if life were to move your lovely limbs, light shine in your blind eyes, and colour flush in your lips, and if such perfection came to your face that I found in you the ideal I so long for, I'd paint you with utmost pride, I'd worship the canvas wherever your image covered it; but you, and your warm living self, would have no more power to quicken my pulse, or scorch my heart with the hot blast of love, than your icy numbness has now, you clay-cold thing of beauty."

He laid a hand lightly on a marble shoulder, then looked up quickly and listened to the long-drawn sob of the storm that seemed as though it answered him.

Crossing to the window, Printhorpe shaded his eyes from the room's bright light, and stared into the night, his deepest feelings were astir in him. His heart had been touched, and the emotional side of his nature had caught fire at the tale of his friend's betrayal, his nerves were excited and tingling. He waited long at

the window, hearing in the hush of the storm the hoarse cry of the hawker, and the turmoil of traffic; seeing the shifting sea of humanity that ebbs and flows, year in year out, seeing, hearing only those sights and sounds which reason could reckon with, and nothing which appealed to his excited imagination.

Turning away, he told himself the night was wild and who could justify the vagaries of a winter's wind. If it had seemed to sob like a human thing why should he start and stare into the street like a nervous woman. He scoffed at his own folly, went into the studio and turned the light full upon his picture.

He meant this work to be the crowning proof of his genius, perhaps the pride of his life; he had put his best power into each stroke of his brush, had set his heart upon its perfection; and now, though technically perfect, it did not please him, for the face of the angel fell short of the ideal face which haunted his imagination, and then slipped from his sight when his fingers sought to trace it.

"Fool that I am," he muttered, then lifted his head with a look of resolution. "I'll not give a second thought to that face that for months has maddened me."

Again the long, low sob of the storm swept through the studio. Instinctively he went to the window.

"Ah! 'tis the wind."

He breathed quickly as a swooping gust boomed heavily against the house and then rent its way through the howling night. The eagerness died out of his eyes, he brushed his hand slowly across his brow, and looked into the fleeting pictures that flamed in the fire.

Taking up the *Times* he sought to break through the spell that was fast proving its power. He looked at the prospects for the University boat race, skimmed through the Parliamentary speeches and smiled at the ravings of the Irish Nationalists, the rubbish a misled people, forgetful of the dustbin, put into Parliament. The racing intelligence he read with a keener interest,

then impatiently flung the paper aside, for the spell was upon him still, compelling him to leave the warmth and comfort of the hearth and go out into the gloom of the dark and inhospitable night seeking, as he had sought many a time, to feed his fancy by the darkly flowing water that he had painted in the foreground of his picture. He went out.

Passing his club Printhorpe paused. It was a foul night. The wind buffeted him, poked its sharp fingers into his ears, and down the back of his collar, causing him to shrug up his shoulders and shiver.

"Coming in for a rubber?" cried a friend mounting the steps and blowing his nose with a force sufficient to scare a cab horse. Printhorpe followed him slowly, then resisted the comfort of the club.

"Confound the crazy fancy," he muttered. "It's strong upon me now. I'll have to see the thing through before I get rid of it."

He walked on swearing at his own credulity. He was a fool, a big fool, and by the time he had crossed the Strand for one of the short cuts that lead to the Embankment, he was quite the biggest fool. A long line of carriages was waiting to draw up before the Hotel Cecil, and he stood for a moment to watch men and women pop out of them like rabbits from their little brown burrows, all gay for a gambol on the grass and he laughed as Neil Vashon, with a face so solemn that he might have been taking it to a wedding or a funeral, stepped stolidly out of a big barouche, with an avalanche of fluff, feathers and flummery following hard behind him.

Crossing the Embankment Printhorpe sheltered in the square space that walls in Cleopatra's Needle and watched the dark current that tossed up a grimy scum. To-night, the waters were very troubled, and watching their unrest, his thoughts travelled back to the times when he and Neil had spent long hours beside this river which, here so sluggish and unlovely in its last

passage to the sea, rises fresh and clear and impetuous among the far-away Cotswold Hills. He thought of crystal waters that, reflecting a sapphire sky, leaped blue and beautiful over moss-green boulders, and babbled merrily through fern-fringed coombes; and he thought of Neil, talking in his joyous mellow voice, of a future that held no place for sadness, with his long limbs stretched at full length on the bank, and his eyes looking out on life as a thing of great gladness. And now for Neil the past was only pain, and the locusts—finbelief, cynicism, indifference—were eating up the present, and darkening the future; they would suck out all its sap, and the life, once like those blue happy waters, was now drifting, as they were through a depth of gloom into the tideless sea.

Big Ben told the time to the City, the sonorous sound brought Printhorpe's thoughts back to his present surroundings; and, as the last note died away in the distance, he stepped towards the light of a lamp, and compared his watch with the hour told him by the clock.

"Eleven o'clock," he said to himself, "well, there's yet time for a rubber at the club."

Halting to muffle his scarf yet more closely about his throat and to drag up the collar of his coat, Printhorpe glanced lightly at the few who passed him by. There was little temptation on this bitter night for those to venture out who could remain within. A policeman, hustling misery and crime out of sight, and a couple of paper boys bawling "H'arrest of a H'aristocrat," soon hurried out of sight. Then from a place where the shadows gathered thickly a woman began to sing in hesitating wavering tones, but with a low sweetness that arrested him for a moment and found its way into his heart. He turned sharply, and dimly descried the form of the singer, a mere girl, new to her trade most likely, for her voice trembled and the storm half-drowned it. In spite of himself Printhorpe was touched.

The pity of it! Instinctively he felt for a coin and held it out towards the singer. She crept towards him into the light and her fingers closed over his *dole*. For one brief moment she stood revealed and he started as one roughly shaken from sleep.

She had come to him. The woman who had never ceased to haunt him. An angel from heaven, or a temptation from hell; he cared only that there, framed in the darkness, was a face that gathered up and expressed all the vague aspirations, the ideal beauty that filled his soul and eluded his pencil.

The conventions of ordinary life were swept away in that one moment of sudden realisation. A great eagerness leaped into his eyes. The artist, not the man, was alive in him. With an exclamation, only half articulate he put out his hand, but it only caught at a long black ribbon that hung down from her throat, it snapped, and in a flash, the small slight figure darted across the road and was lost in the darkness beyond it.

He had found all, and in a breath he had lost it. With the ribbon grasped tightly in his hand Printhorpe stood alone, amazed, confounded.

CHAPTER IV

A DANCE TO HONOUR THE DEAD

Outside—The bitter night, the ghoulisn fog and the cruel grip of the malevolent wind, which swept along the Thames Embankment.

Inside—The effulgence of light, the warmth and exquisite comfort of a suite of magnificent reception rooms that were set apart for the potpourri which comprises London's elastic society.

The end justified the means, thought any who thought at all; and so society danced to the memory of a dead man, and made merry that it might add some of the stones to the great tombstone that was to be erected to his honour. The potpourri was well mixed and bemingled. In it were women beautiful, ugly, pleasing and plain; over-blown, full-blown and budding; also statesmen and warriors, nincompoops, philanthropists and fools; good and bad, peace-makers and peace-breakers—was ever potpourri better blended? And as the strains of Herr Gottlieb's orchestra filled the Grand Hall and filtered through the long galleries of the Hotel Cecil, light hearts grew lighter, bright eyes brighter, and dancing feet moved joyously to the Siren strains of the entrancing measure. But how many minds went back to the days when the tired eyes of a forsaken soldier had vainly scanned the sky line, straining through the pitiless glare of a Southern sun for a sight of the cloud of yellow sand that would herald the lagging help which came too late. How

many paused to wonder at the mystery and pain of the evening when the sun had set upon an accursed city, stained with the blood of one white man and his band of dusky disciples.

The Richelieu supper-room, barely opened, was filled quickly, for folk had hovered before its doors like hungry hounds sniffing their horse-flesh, and within it there was a ceaseless chattering; an excellent supper, has magical effect upon the string that ties the tongue, and to-night there was ample testimony to the intelligence of St. James the Less.

Seated at a corner table a man and a woman were taking some of the change due to them from the guineas they had given towards the great tombstone. The man was a middle-aged, swarthy-faced foreigner. The woman was young, undeniably pretty and dressed in the daring dazzling colouring of Leighton's "Flaming June."

It had cost Mrs. Seligman weeks of anxious care and consideration before she had grasped the artist's scheme of subtle shading. Having done so, she had betaken herself to her dressmaker and bade her fashion a dress of crudest scarlet that made the French woman shudder. Over this they had laid a sheeny gauze of gold, next orange, fine as the threads of the silkworm's film; then when primrose crepe fell softly above those other shades, the woman had shrieked to the Virgin to behold a triumph of artistic ingenuity that glowed with a flaming sunset's glory, and shimmered with a harvest moonlight's pale purity! Then was the triumph laid aside till the ball in the dead man's honour brought its beauty into sight.

So far, the Count and his companion were content with their change, and neither felt defrauded. Each had a motive in seeking the society of the other, the supper was excellent, and neither was indifferent to the pleasures of the table. For the Count de Cosimo a spell of Mrs. Seligman's society held much the same fascination as a gamble on the gold mines; there was always

an exciting uncertainty connected with what it would lead to; and she tolerated him because his social status was satisfactory, his income fabulous and most of her female friends wanted him.

• “If he wasn’t Count de Cosimo, not that those foreign imitation titles weigh much, and if he hadn’t a big place in Italy or Sicily, or some such orangey, palm-grovey, garlicky place, and if the oof-birds didn’t hover over him, I’d not let him help my cook to wash up the plates in the kitchen, much less let myself be seen about with him; but as it is—” She shivered her white shoulders—

“Heavens, he’s dear at the price!”

“The thing is well done,” the Count said to her.

“Which, what?” •

He waved his hand in a comprehensive circle.

“Ah, the ball you mean?”

Turning her shapely head slowly, Angela Seligman looked about her with a long acquired self-possession. “It’s much like the Zoo,” she added with an insolent little laugh.

• “I don’t know half the people here.”

“Heaven forfend you from such a curse. Yes, it’s like the Zoo, and I’m going to amuse myself in identifying the animals. I’ll begin with the girl opposite in green, the scraggy one with arms like chicken’s drumsticks; now, she is a chimpanzee. I’m certain she is craving to crack nuts. I also see a pelican, there, the man in the corner with the long neck and beaky nose. I’d not be a bit surprised if he dabbed that beak in the dishes. And oh! look at the purple auricula-faced woman eating lobster. She is like the distorted pigs one sees in a pig book. I wouldn’t insult the real animal. Oh look at her appalling Christmas beef back; she should be skewered together and stuck about with paper rosettes, instead of those ripping big rubies. Bah! she is sickening, she’d pop flat as an air-ball if anything pricked her.”

The Count’s eyes followed hers to the best of their

ability, the velocity of her speech strained his senses severely, he felt like a dog running after a bicycle.

"Why talk of all these people?" he asked her.

"Why not; after their kind they are amusing, and doubtless they talk of me."

"They can't help themselves. Who could look at a perfect picture and not express their feelings?"

She put up her hand and checked his speech impatiently,

"Spare me such speeches, they bore me, and are too sweet to be wholesome."

He squared his jaw sulkily.

"Always unkind to me."

She made haste to soothe him.

"On the principle it's good for you; perhaps there is wisdom in chastening those we most—" She laughed lightly.

He leaned forward, a look of alertness burnt in his eyes as he fastened them on her.

"Angela, don't grudge me the end of that sentence."

"I forgot that the idea was Biblical, and this is no place to quote Scripture."

"Ah, you are like Penelope, you always unravel your work as fast as you weave it. For the future I shall think of you as Penelope until you tell me there is no need to."

"Think anything you like, but for mercy's sake take your eyes off me; people are watching us. Let me see, what were we talking about. Oh yes, we were saying that people were like animals, or animals like people, it's all the same. Let's go on; we haven't nearly gone round the cages."

For a second her bright eyes settled upon him.

"I think I see a mole, a little brown burrowing mole," she said with a childlike innocence that duped him.

There was a flash of her small white teeth as she smiled and bowed to a Bishop. She had once sold the church dignitary a 'Golliwogg' doll, at a bazaar for the

blind, and since then she never failed to send him the salutation; it was such a public and simple method of putting a tiny patch over rather a ragged reputation.

"Dear old pet," she murmured sweetly withdrawing her eyes from the Bishop, "he's so happy forking in plovers' eggs; apparently he swallows them whole like homœopathic pills. I'll jump up and pat his back if he chokes. I think we had better go now, we have been here for centuries; looks as if we had gone tea and dinnerless in order to save up for supper."

Mrs. Seligman looked charming as she swished her soft skirts down the long length of the room, with her slender figure gracefully erect, her head carried high and her sparkling eyes knowing intuitively where to seek signals of recognition, and where to steer clear of stares of oblivion.

In her hey-day of youth and full flush of success she had played incautiously with the eleventh commandment, "Thou shalt not be found out," and as Vanity Fair resents any undue liberties with the decree it has so rigidly laid down, Angela had learned, often from those who themselves were in need of a little gentle consideration from a scandalised society, that the tiresome tarnish would work through the most discreet coatings of white-wash.

Flashing bright smiles at her allies, tossing light words to her friends, and, beyond an occasional sharp setting of her white teeth, giving no sign of the scarcely covered insolence of her foes, she reached the doorway. There, her light footsteps seemed to falter and Angela stood very still. Unconsciously she clasped her small hands closely together, the colour ebbed from her face, then swiftly swept over it; her lips parted eagerly; her breath came quickly and the soft tender look of a docile child crept round her mouth, almost smoothing away the lines that time and life, as she had lived it, had pencilled there.

A thousand voices were buzzing all about her, strains

of music came dancing towards her, but one voice only, which for years she had not heard, now echoed in Angela Seligman's heart, and, for some moments she was deaf to the hum of humanity, and careless of the sweet dance music. She turned to the little man who hovered beside her, whose beady black eyes watched her with unfeigned anxiety.

"Go now, you can go," she said with scarcely concealed impatience.

"Ah! you are ill?"

"Yes, of course I'm ill; toothache, dreadful, racking toothache, can't you go?"

He drew back before her petulant passion, then faltered a fresh request.

"Yes, yes, anything you like," she answered feverishly. "I'll dance with you later, I'll dance the rest of the night with you, to-morrow night and every night till I'm dead, and then you shall dance with my bones, if you'll only go."

The tone of her final words was such as might have been addressed to a refractory cur, and like a cur the little Sicilian slunk from her side.

While her feet threaded their way swiftly through the crowd, her eyes fastened upon the face of the man, whose figure, towering imperiously, seemed to stunt all others, and she bit her lips sharply and moved on towards him as if drawn almost against her will. Then just as she reached him, a small dark-eyed damsel slipped in between them and he stooped his head to listen to her prattle.

Sheltering behind an elephantine dowager, Angela watched him wistfully. Was it a hundred years ago, that she had stroked her fingers over his dark hair, now streaked heavily with grey; that she had balanced playfully on tip-toe in order that she might rise to the level of his shoulder; that he had kissed her lips with loving kisses and looked at her with eyes all aglow with adoring light. Ah! how she loved him still, loved him almost as much as she loved herself.

The maiden still prattled, the man still listened and so Angela glanced into the long mirror that faced her, took heart of grace and glanced again. Yes, her flaming armour was beautiful, her beauty undeniable, her wits sharper than any two-edged sword; she rarely played a losing game, and drew the deuce when she cut for hearts. Having mentally shuffled the cards for the game she was about to play, she flung a crumb of gratitude to the grim messenger who had beckoned to the sickly Israelite to whom she had sold herself in exchange for the flesh-pots her greedy soul had above all things desired.

Leaning on her partner's arm the dark-eyed damsel moved away, and as she passed her by Angela overheard her saying:

"He's such a dear, queer thing, and but for him I shouldn't be here to-night; it's such a joke, you know; his place is close to ours, and he's awfully rich, you know; and mother's so absurd, you know."

The little dribblets of gush drifted away and with them the lass and her lover.

"Neil."

The one word spoken so softly, was muffled in the ceaseless human hum, but at the furtive touch of the small hand that was lightly laid upon his arm, Neil Vashon looked down and saw the eager upturned face, and wonderful shimmering figure. No gleam of gladness sprang into his passionless eyes, no look of enthraldom flew to his face, only a thin, swift smile of contempt flickered for a moment across his mouth as the diamonds that clustered thick upon Angela's throat, and rose high in a cunning device upon her head, darted their pale fire towards him.

Her breath came in little helpless gasps, and her eyes, so rarely true to the workings of her mind, now questioned his own with unwonted candour.

"Neil, you are silent, but it is because you are so surprised to see me? Neil, for six long years I have

waited and watched for our meeting, and now that we have met. . . Ah! say that you are glad."

An unimpassioned voice answered her feverish appeal.

"It's more than kind of you, Mrs. Seligman, to have wasted a thought on the fact of my existence."

She twisted her fingers nervously together, snapping the fragile framework of her fan.

"Not that hateful name from you, Neil, that is for the tiresome social world that so wearies me. Have you forgotten that my name is Angela—and that you used to call me Angel?"

With hope bubbling high she looked for the hot flush of recollection that would surely scorch his face, for the relaxing of his stern mouth, but watched in vain. And as with lowered eyes she stood silent beside him, the wings of Time seem to soar backward, and winging her with them, they drew her into a golden past. The garish light ceased to glitter, the music sank to silence, laughter hushed and restless forms faded.

She saw a fertile valley, steeped in high-summer sunshine, a green pageant of plenty. She heard the ceaseless song of birds, the drone of honey-laden bees, and as she breathed the fragrant breath of flowers, her fingers fumbled unconsciously for the sweet lavender sprigs that were wont to be fastened in the folds of her simple bodice. Again she saw the glad young face of her soldier lover, a face so strong with a purpose of earnest life, so tender with the depth of a great love and unfaltering faith. And she felt that firm clasp of his hand, as she had felt it in the days when they had walked together weaving beautiful dream threads through a bright coloured warp; and living those moments gleamed from that golden past Angela Seligman was happy, so happy.

The glitter of reality dimmed the sunshine of her fancy, and wiped out the soft picture painted so vividly upon the tablets of her memory. The slow swinging

measure of a waltz, silenced the song of birds, and the hum of bees, and a diamond device of much magnificence blazed in the place of the sweet scented lavender. But the stalwart figure of the soldier-lover stood close beside her. The cards yet held tremendous possibilities.

Clearly Neil Vashon's face confessed that his mind had also travelled through a whole world of thought, and its sternness softened, as he scanned the scarlet banner of the Egyptians that, side by side with the Union Jack, hung suspended over the balcony. But his wanderings had been through a world where Angela Seligman had neither part nor lot, and he started, as she, quick to notice the change on his face, drew nearer to his side. Doubtless he had also walked with her in that elusive, happy valley. She lifted her eyes and rested them confidently on his face.

"Neil, tell me what you have been thinking of—I long to know?"

"Of the best friend I ever had," he answered simply. "I have been thinking of Gordon."

~~The~~ rude awakening was amazing. Her foot beat the ground with petulance, she shrugged her shoulders.

"What absurdly unsuitable thoughts for a ball-room, so gloomy and gruesome—"

Vashon glanced at her quickly and carelessly, then laughed a cynical laugh she little liked.

So it was absurdly unsuitable to dedicate a few thoughts to one, who, though he had passed through the grey valley of the shadows, was unconsciously responsible for the gathering he would so surely have shunned in life; gruesome and gloomy to remember the man who would have faced the devilish "Die-hards." rather than this restless sea of society. He frowned heavily at the folly that had led him to let this woman trample upon the threshold of his thoughts, then turned his eyes towards the door-way.

And Angela understood that in her mortification, she had played her cards clumsily.

"Fool that I have been," she whispered between her teeth. Then forgetting time and place she held out her hands towards him. The mad undisciplined desire of her heart shook her voice, and her words came to him in gusts.

"Neil, stay, hear me. Believe me, when I tell you that I have not had an hour's happiness since the day when I foreswore you, and married that fool for what he could give me."

"Poor devil," muttered Vashon, with an involuntary feeling of pity for the man who had supplanted him.

Angela saw that she had overshot the mark and endeavoured to right herself hastily.

"Oh, but I was never positively unkind to him, and I'm an excellent mother to the child. But why do I waste time talking of these trivialities? Ah! but you shall not turn away, you shall listen when I tell you that the loss of your love was, and is, my unutterable misery. Neil, did I not write to you time after time, did I not implore you to come back to me, to realise I was yours body and soul." The passion of her words choked her. With shaking fingers she wrenched at the flashing band that circled her throat. "And, Neil, when I was free did I not write and— —Ah, for God's sake don't look at me like that."

She dropped her shameless eyes and when, with a fierce intolerance, he turned to her, the black scorn on his face seemed to bring a thick darkness before her.

"Yes, Mrs. Seligman, part of your speech is flecked with facts; you did see fit to write to me, time after time, as you say, and your letters were very explicit; they explained clearly the honourable position you offered me. And after you were, what you call free, after death had snapped the chain, that by your own telling had never really bound you, you wrote and told me what every paper in England had already published; but the part you so frequently and generously offered, was scarcely suited to me."

"Ah, you are cruel."

Just for an instant the memory of past pain and shattered faith shadowed his face and shook his speech.

"Cruel, am I? and is cruelty a crime you cannot comprehend?"

"Then you have not forgiven, not for—forgotten?" she cried almost gladly, for she had heard the sharp, quick break, seen the shadowed face, and she hugged the wild hope that he would not withhold his pardon.

"Mrs. Seligman, I have long since forgiven, but the lesson you taught me was too valuable to be lightly forgotten."

Bending his head with due courtesy Neil Vashon turned away, and she watched him moving through the crowd, towering high above each and all, till he passed beyond her sight.

Reproaches, she would have welcomed gladly. Denunciation would have been thrilling and turned easily to adulation. Anger she could have soothed gently. Passion she would readily have changed to peace. But indifference, contempt, even contentment, these were beyond her. They were indeed sharp stones in the place of the bread she was so hungry for.

The music, rippling as light laughter, came dancing towards her. Angela shook herself mentally, and again preened hastily before the mirror, skimming her fingers lightly over a lappet of lace and twitching her soft skirts till their multi-coloured shades flashed their fire. Then calmly surveying the crush she unravelled a friend from its tangle and stepped hurriedly towards the scowling Sicilian.

"Tired of the giant that has been monopolising you?" questioned the pigmy sulkily.

"Ah, he is a Goliath that slings his own stones, he doesn't let others sling them at him; and the stones he slings certainly hit straight."

He grasped just as much of the drift of her words as she intended, and that was nothing at all.

"Extraordinary sort of fellow, beats me how Prin-thorpe can live with him," he grunted.

A quick questioning look came to Angela's eyes.

"What Printhorpe? The artist?"

"Yes, the fellow that paints portraits, that look as if they would step out of the canvass and speak."

Angela Seligman laughed to herself. The chance words had set her fertile brain to work and she plotted swiftly and silently, but unsatisfactorily, for no definite scheme would shape itself. Then she turned to a lad who had come up beside her, a charming-looking lad, fresh from Sandhurst and scarcely used to a very recent commission. He had waited long and anxiously for the dance she had so glibly promised him.

In the background his mother watched him anxiously. As the sight of the hawk frenzies the maternal hen, so Angela Seligman set many a mother's fears a-fluttering; but unlike the biddable balls of yellow fluff, the sons would do their best to attract the pretty hawk, who often piqued them by not pouncing, probably because she was marking fatter prey.

"Dance with you?" she said to the boy gaily, "you pretty child, you're just like one of the cherubs on my silver hair brushes. I promised, did I? Oh, that's nothing. Why, I once promised a curate I'd make a hundred bed-socks for a sanatorium! You dear little fellow, go and dance with someone your own age and size. I'd gladly give you a sovereign to spend on sweets, but I really could not dance with you." She turned to the attendant Count.

"Deliver me from the hands of strange children. Take me into supper. I'm tired and thirsty, I'm everything but the only thing that I want to be."

Like some exquisite bird of impossible plumage she skimmed across the room, the Count keeping pace beside her. And the lad's mother gave thanks as she watched her Jacky, very red, very hot and apparently exceedingly angry, kick his sister through the staccato strains of the polka.

CHAPTER V

SHREDDED SHEETS

“Thank Goodness, that’s over! but it’s a good bit the wrong side of midnight. Hullo!” and Neil Vashon stopped short, seeing for the first time that he had the room to himself.

For a moment he debated whether he should go to the club and join Printhorpe, or sit at home, with a pipe of peace, till Printhorpe joined him, and chose the latter course as being the more comfortable and the less troublesome. Scarcely had he pulled his chair before the fire, when he jumped up and listened to the tread of feet that paced the room above him. The next moment he had joined Printhorpe in the studio, and for the first time in their lives Printhorpe failed to greet him gladly.

“Mercy me! Are you producing a stage snow-storm,” cried Vashon staring amazed as his friend shredded sheet after sheet of paper, tossed it aside in small white flakes and then restlessly paced the room. “For heaven’s sake, stop padding round like a caged lion. What’s wrong, Stephen?”

“Neil, I have seen her.”

“The deuce you have! but enlighten me; is she a canary, a woman, a phantasmagoria, or a cat?”

Printhorpe turned away impatiently,

“Don’t humbug, I can’t stand it.”

“Dear old fellow, I won’t if you’re serious, and I’m sorry,” answered Vashon gravely as he saw an unwonted look on Printhorpe’s face.

"Neil, I have told you that for months past I have been trying to embody an ideal face which has a real existence for me. It has haunted me, yet I cannot paint it. Nothing else can satisfy me, and so my picture only dejects me. Whatever others may see in it, to me it is stamped with failure, failure to give to the angel I have painted in it the perfect face of my dreams. I'm a matter-of-fact sort of fellow by nature; heaven forbid that I should become a dreamer of dreams, a visionary, a romancer, but to-night the voice of the wind drew me persistently to her. She came to me as a living woman, out of the darkness, for an instant I held her in the light, then I lost her. I remember that I stood with my senses dazed, so dazed that I saw her slip away in the shadow, before I followed and of course, failed hopelessly to find her. And, as a proof that I am not raving, here is the legacy that unknowingly she left me."

Printhorpe held out the black ribbon and waited in silence while Vashon with a puzzled half sceptical air scrutinized the small silver coin that hung suspended from it and read aloud the name Lucia that was enamelled in scarlet letters clearly across the face of it.

"Lucia, a pretty soft-sounding name," said Vashon, laying down the length of ribbon. "Where did you see her?"

"On the Embankment."

"Not the most respectable place for a good-looking young woman's evening stroll."

"What matter, she was only a poor little street-singer, and she might be a gutter girl for all I care," rejoined Printhorpe hotly. "Can't you see, man, I'm only thinking of my picture and of her as a model for it. I've tried at least a dozen times to-night to pencil her," he glanced at the scattered shreds of paper, "but it was worse than useless. I can't get her; Neil, now that I know that she exists, not in fancy, but in fact, I'll not rest till I find her."

"Give it up, Stephen, it's not good enough; the idea is an absurdity. You can't spend your life scouring London for what you're not the least likely to find."

"Perhaps not," said Printhorpe drearily, "but I shall not exhibit that picture till her face is painted upon it; so it may be that the picture will never go a step beyond the studio."

"Absurd," said Vashon in a tone of much vexation.

Walking to the great stretch of canvass he uncovered it.

"Stephen, it's very fine. Where did you get the idea of it?"

Printhorpe joined him. A moment's thought and he answered him:—

"Whither shall I go then from thy spirit? or whither shall I go then from thy presence?"

"If I climb up into heaven, thou art there: if I go down to hell, thou art there also."

"If I take the wings of the morning; and remain in the uttermost parts of the sea;

"And where shall thy hand lead me: and thy right hand shall hold me."

"There," he said, "that is the idea of it. The crouching figure of sin and sorrow cowers away from the Angel of the Presence, with the instinctive recoil of sin from righteousness: the dawn you see breaking faintly in the east foreshadows the coming day and the flight of night and darkness—and I have called the picture 'The Wings of the Morning.'"

"The Wings of the Morning," repeated Vashon slowly. "Stephen, I tell you it's magnificent; there'll be nothing to touch it, of course you'll exhibit it."

But Printhorpe only stared moodily at the spirit face of the shining angel, then turned impetuously to his palette. The next moment he had besmeared the angel's face with a heavy streak of dark paint.

"You're nothing but a madman," shouted Vashon clutching angrily at his friend's arm.

There was something that had the sound of a sob in Printhorpe's voice.

"Perhaps some day I shall exhibit it, but not yet."

"Insanity, cursed folly," ejaculated Vashon puffing at his pipe furiously. "Stephen chuck your work for awhile and come away with me. You'll remember I told you I had to go to Canada and see about the sale of my cousin Margaret Craven's property, and to-morrow I mean to go down to Shropshire and consult with her. Come with me and forget all this insanity. Do, dear old Dolly," he urged dropping into the name that dated from their boyhood.

Printhorpe shook his head.

"Well, at all events come down to Wyburn Court with me to-morrow. Margaret, poor soul, won't worry you and it's a queer old place with every interest in it, from Queen Elizabeth's cradle to a ghost strolling round the gallery."

"How long will the whole business take you?"

"A month or six weeks, not more. Come along, Dolly."

"No, no, Neil, not now, but if on your return I'm no nearer gaining my heart's desire I'll bury the longing for it so deep that it will die for lack of light and air, and then we might do worse than have a spell of yachting."

"And that is the best you can do, Dolly?"

"That is the best."

By tacit consent they made no further allusion to the circumstances that had brought about the picture's partial effacement. Soon they drifted into the long intervals of restful silence, broken by easy exchange of talk, that marked their familiarity and their friendship, and so lightly did Vashon allude to his chance meeting that night, with the woman who had once such power to torture him, that Printhorpe scarcely noted the fact that they had met.

The darkness gave way to dawn before the two men

bade each other "good-night." Then the carriages that conveyed the potpourri from the Memorial ball commenced to flash their lights, and as the potpourri fell asleep, the humbler folk began another day, the hungry awoke to their hunger, the workers went forth to their work, the scarlet flag of the Egyptians was furled and set aside, and an army of sweepers swept out the great ball-room.

CHAPTER VI

THE DEATH DAY

FROM daylight to dusk an unusual silence had fallen upon a great house where there was never a sound of light laughter, and Lady Margaret Craven's servants spoke of it as the "death day," and instinctively sank their voices to a whisper. Those of them who remembered their mistress in the time of her bondage wondered at the strange instinct that made her keep sacred each anniversary of her emancipation, and in their recollection of her release, forgot that this day was also the date of her tiny child's death. God and that child's mother were the sole, silent witnesses of the manner in which it had died.

At the first streak of a pale, dull dawn, Margaret Craven would wrap herself in a shroud of miserable recollections and, locking herself up alone with her thoughts, she would live again each hour of an appalling past, hearing the hateful voice and seeing the horrible face of the drunken bully who had married her at a time when she was alone in the world and very lonely, and who had tricked her into a belief that he loved and needed her for herself alone, and valued neither the great wealth nor yet the high position that belonged to her.

For some months it had amused Colonel Craven to act the master in the beautiful home that had come to him through his wife, and he had strutted for hours round the old Elizabethan block of building, and had gloated over the well-stocked covers, the fertile valleys,

the homesteads and far-reaching pasture lands that went with it. The interior of the house delighted him less. The black oak panelling, the heavily carved furniture, the polished floors and huge open tiled fireplaces seemed somewhat gloomy; but the picture gallery pleased him mightily, for though he decided that its pictures depicted "a damned ugly-looking lot," they afforded ample corroboration of his wife's long lineage.

But soon there returned to him the "drink devil" that for a time had left him, and it brought with it other devils great as itself, and they gripped a hold over the man and dragged him below the level of the lowest beasts. Servants fled from before their drunken master, horses shrank back in their boxes, and hounds shivered and cowered down in their kennels at the least sound of his shambling foot-fall, and the face of his wife, never fair, grew grey, and terror and loathing traced deep lines upon it; dread and dismay laid their heavy hand upon her shoulders, till her form, never graceful, grew sadly shrunk and bowed.

Year after year, as the day came round that marked at once the climax of servitude and her enfranchisement, the silent, sad woman gave herself up to the memories with which she contended so bravely at all other times. One day she dedicated to the past, and spent alone the long hours from dawn to dusk. As the hands travelled round the dial of the clock she grew nervously watchful, and once more as the hour approached she lived through the terrors of the closing scenes.

It was just upon such another day as this that the horror had come home to her. A day when one questions if the sun had ever shone in skies of blue, if summer sights and scents and singing birds had ever been, or whether sunny skies, sweet sights and scents were but fools' fancies, and the singing birds mocking birds. Then, as to-day, she had watched the snowflakes falling fast, and listened to the keening of the easterly wind as it swept round the house, tossing bare branches and

setting the snow flakes twirling like little ghostly mad things. Growing weary of wind and weather she had turned away from the window, and cautiously, tenderly leaned over a daintily curtained cot, and looked loving at the atom of humanity that lay between the blankets, till her husband's rasping voice paralyzed for a moment every nerve in her body. He was in the room, standing beside her with a look in his eyes that even she had never yet seen in them. Instinctively she placed herself between the child and him.

"A doll," he said scoffingly, pushed her impatiently aside and tore the covering from the child's warm body. "A doll with red cheeks, yellow curls and dimples; and you shall not waste your time any more with it, I will burn it."

He breathed heavily, his face flushed darkly, but the drink devil had enfeebled him; her frenzied grip on his arm hurt him, and it took some time before a portion of brute strength came back to him. The child's wailing, the mother's desperate resistance maddened him, and the leaping fire-flames seemed waiting to lick their red tongues over the frail, little life he destined for them. But his wife's grip baffled him. With a curse he flung the child aside, and with a blow he felled its mother.

The silence half sobered him; he bent for a moment over the tiny crumpled up body lying in a heap at his feet. The doll was very still, very white—was it dead?

Groping, shambling with helpless hands outstretched to nothing, Colonel Craven shuffled from the room, made his way to the uppermost window of the gallery, and threw himself forward into the night.

Downstairs the servants noted the unwonted peace that had fallen upon the house. Their mistress spent many an hour in solitude with her child; this was the only gleam of light that remained in her life, but the sound of their master's blaspheming was seldom so long silenced and the sight of his hated face was rarely

so long unseen. The unwonted calm had been broken by their lady's bell, peal upon peal, and they had found her crouching down upon the ground, the blood trickling from a cut upon her face, and with a dead child hugged against her breast.

She had fallen with the infant in her arms, she told them, a swift over-powering faintness had overtaken her. And she held it towards them and, well knowing it was dead, besought them to tell her had she hurt it. Like many another woman, Margaret Craven lied to shield the man who crucified her.

They buried the waxen baby in a grave with its father, and the wife and mother stood beside the coffins, one so mighty, the other so tiny, and she suffered them to lie for their long last sleep together, making no dissent, lest the horror that filled her heart should escape from her lips.

From that day onward Margaret Craven lived alone with her sorrow and few guessed its depth.

And now on this fifth anniversary, the grey dull veil that lay upon the world had deepened with the gathering twilight before she roused herself from carding out the sorrows of a miserable past. Neil Vashon, her cousin, was coming that evening, and she must prepare to gather up the threads of the present. She walked over to her window, and leaned out for a moment into the blackness of the night. The keen wind blowing in from a great way off stirred the dark hair on her temples, and set a splash of colour on her worn face. It would be hard, she thought, to discuss work-a-day topics on that night, and to sacrifice her little span of strict seclusion. The transition would be so sudden. Then there stole into her soul the yearning for music, that medium of inarticulate expression which had so often eased the intolerable strain. It was the bridge over which she would pass from the solitude of her spiritual isolation to the natural intercourse of daily life and the companionship of the kinsman ever

ready to help her. As she made her way to the organ gallery and rang for lights, the train steamed into Tenbury Station.

Neil Vashon stepped down to the platform and passing through the doorway he surveyed with no small disgust the sheet of water that confronted him.

The Teme had overflowed its banks, though the banks were high, and the river-bed was wide; but days and nights of rain varied only by sleet storms and snow had put the Teme past its patience. And when huddled up snow-heaps drifted and lost themselves in a medley of small streams that ran helter skelter into the lap of their heavy-laden sister; it flung off its noisy welter of waters which raced turbulently down the main street, forcing folk to shelter in the upper stories, for it rushed rudely into their houses, working a ruthless riot of ruin. The Teme had often played this prank before, but this evening it surpassed all its previous performances, and it swelled down the main street and forced its way up the road that faced the station.

"Jove! but it's a bit chilly for wading," thought Neil Vashon as he splashed towards the dog cart awaiting him.

The mare tossed her chestnut head, curvetted and looked askance at the ugly flood, and danced pettishly up the steep hill, that led to drier ground, before she sped steadily through the easterly wind, that cramped Vashon's hands and pinched his finger nails, so that he could scarcely grip the reins. Man and mare were glad enough as they turned in at the lodge gates, left the long avenue behind them, and drew up before the great oak door that opened wide for Vashon.

Inside the hall he drew near the roaring fire, stretched out his hands, and let its heat bring back life to them. For one moment he wondered where Margaret was, and missed her accustomed welcome; but the waves of sound that swelled down to him told him that

THE DEATH DAY

she was lost in her music, and he prevented the old butler, who had grown grey in the family service, from disturbing her.

Left to himself Vashon threw himself into the depths of an armchair and listened with quickened pulses to the self-revealing music in which the solitary soul of Margaret Craven alone found expression. Whether she drew from the creations of others all that most appealed to herself, or whether by a strange inspiration she wove her thoughts into harmony that was all her own, Vashon neither knew nor cared. She projected her pent-up self upon the waves of sound, finding in them the rest and soothing consolation that her starved nature yearned after; but to one who held the key to her heart, it was inexpressibly touching.

Through the mind of the woman, as she sat there drawing out the heart of the organ through her fingers, passed memories that covered the whole of her life. The yearning for the beautiful, which, as a little child, had filled her small heart as she cuddled the flax-haired, pink-cheeked dollies against her sallow little cheeks, and wished so much that her eyes were blue, her cheeks as pink, her hair as golden. The yearning to be loved as dearly as the bonnie brother who filled his parents' heart and lorded it over her; and then, when he died and left her lonelier than ever, the pitiful make-believe that the parents did not turn away from the ugly little daughter that was left them.

Through her solitary girlhood the same longing to be something to somebody remained, and she lived in an unsuspected world of maiden fancies, her only escape from the dull, cold, loveless realities of actual life. The music grew sweeter and fuller as she lingered over the memories of the time when hope still hovered over the threshold of life; when for her too—even for her—one might come who should turn her twilight into glorious day, who should love her—Margaret—but for herself; and in that love all the pent-up forces of her

nature should find vent and expend themselves in making the world a better place.

Then the music grew troubled, and the listener knew that Margaret's thoughts were dwelling on the disillusionment of her short married life. But out of the trouble grew a wistful sweetness, a great yearning and a partial peace. The child had come to her, and her thwarted woman's heart expended itself in mother-love for something that was really her own. The meaning of life grew plain to her, she rose out of and above its narrow restrictions, she lost herself in the life of another, anticipating the revelation of Eternity, and passing to the conception of the Divine by the bridge of a little human child's love.

Then the horror came, and Neil unconsciously clenched his hands, as he listened to the crashing chords that suddenly died away into a horrible silence torn by a wail of unutterable sadness. The music ceased abruptly. Margaret Craven drew down her hands, and her face flushed from throat to forehead.

"Ah, I am ashamed of myself, ashamed of these old fancies. What have they to do with the real Margaret Craven?"

She glanced at a glass panel sunk above the keyboard, and saw therein reflected a woman whose years numbered thirty, whose heart seemed dead within her, slain by the mocking of all her hopes, whose homely features were set in a sallow face drawn and very weary. From temple to cheek-bone a deep scar was upon it, now crimsoned by the blood that, under intense excitement, would always gather beneath it. Sad eyes, dark, speaking and splendid, stared at this woman until the hot tears that welled into them blurred her from their sight.

At the sound of a foot-fall she dashed them aside and, turning hastily, she welcomed her cousin with both hands extended towards him.

"Dear Neil, I should have been down to welcome you. Why did no one tell me that you had come?"

"My fault, Margaret, I would not let them; not for anything would I have disturbed your playing."

"That would have been a trivial thing."

He noticed the twitching of the hands, still clasped in his, the quick contraction of the brow. His eyes scanned quickly the intense weariness that shadowed her face.

"You are looking ill, Margaret, and tired."

"Am I? I have done nothing to tire me, though indeed doing nothing is terribly tiring."

"I cannot think of you as being idle."

"To-day my hands have been utterly inert, but my heart has been all unrest, and all day long I have been thinking, thinking." The quiver of a strong feeling bleached her face. "Neil, for me this is a sad day."

For a moment his look questioned her, then he laid his hand gently on her bowed head, and Margaret knew that he understood her.

During dinner their talk grew lighter and they discussed the plans necessary for the sale of the Canadian property with a clear conciseness. Neil Vashon laid his views before her, and she agreed readily to all he said on the subject. But it was not till they had returned to the library that she consulted him on a matter that interested her much more than the sale of her property.

"Neil, I have had a letter from a man whom I have never seen, but distinctly remember having heard of."

"Yes? Who is it?"

"He is, or rather he was, an Italian, for he is dead now. Poor creature, his pride prevented him from appealing to me till he knew he was dying, though he

was not too proud to gamble away his every farthing on the gaming tables at Monte Carlo. He reached London in a state of destitution, and died the very day that I got his letter, in which he implores me to protect his only child, a daughter. What had I better do for her? The arrangement I have made can only be very temporary, and there is no denying the fact that the girl has claims upon me, for her mother was—" Margaret paused, how she hated that name,— "her mother was a Craven. Neil, what had I better do for her?"

Neil Vashon's pipe was blocked. He searched for a point to pierce its funnel; it was a minute before he answered her.

"Send her to school."

"She's nearly eighteen."

"Why can't her mother look after her?"

"Because she is dead."

"An excellent reason. Margaret, a change would do you good. How would it be to go up to Town and take a look at her? I'll write to Printhorpe to look after you, then you could inspect your legacy, and judge what you had better do for her."

She shook her head decidedly.

"Not for anything, Neil. I shall never leave home again."

Vashon looked up from his absorbing work of prodding his pipe.

"As you will, dear; then have her down here to see you. But don't do anything that you might afterwards be sorry for. The daughter of a foreign father and a mother who came from the Cravens might develope into a very doubtful blessing."

Stretching out his hand he dived into his cousin's work-basket, making havoc of its neatness, and she protested only feebly when he captured a pair of tiny sharp scissors, and with them poked at his pipe.

She laughed as she looked at him.

"Neil, you are the only one in the world who would be allowed to desecrate my best scissors."

"And barring Printhorpe, you are the only one in the world I would trust with all my thoughts."

"Dear Neil."

"Dear Margaret."

And the hours sped by smoothly, while the man and woman, the tally of whose lives had been deeply notched by love's mockery, revived old scenes and associations that were linked with the days of their childhood.

CHAPTER VII

A SUBTLE SCHEME

To step into Mrs. Seligman's small house in Park Lane was like launching oneself into a flood of sunshine. If the outside world were gloomy, the gloom was forgotten when its walls encompassed one; and when the day was bright, its brilliancy was rivalled within. She had decorated it principally in yellows of every shade and blending, from crocus to palest cream colour. In it there were tawny carpets and hangings that combined citron, claud-tint and amber. The woodwork of the furniture was enamelled a delicate ivory colour, and the walls were tinted with shadings that blended cunningly together.

Mrs. Seligman was entertaining a few people in her pretty drawing-room, or strictly speaking, they were endeavouring to entertain her; and on that particular afternoon this was no easy matter. An unreasonable fractiousness had taken hold of her, such as might have been condoned in her little daughter who was lying full length upon the floor earnestly engaged in inducing some toy soldiers to stand straight upon their legs.

Angela's love for her child was as spasmodic and capricious as the love she gave her French poodle, and her piping bullfinch. If the poodle happened to annoy her, she pinched its ears and drove it from her, and if the pipe of the bullfinch did not please her at the moment, a cover thrown angrily over its cage soon silenced its song; and should little Dottie's guile-

less prattle chance to jar upon her mother's fitful mood, a door instantaneously divided them.

A goodly young stripling, who frequently exchanged the grime of Woolwich and the monotony of the mess for Mrs. Seligman's society, had ingeniously tucked away his lanky legs, and squatting on the floor beside the child, helped her to regulate the toy army of tin soldiers. He played daily at a game that was called soldiering. A moderate number of parades, a saunter round stables, and an occasional duty visit to his Colonel's wife had so far compassed his most arduous duties. Angela's mother-in-law, draped in crape from head to foot, was wedged tightly in a capacious chair. A lady who had painted her face, and tired her head till it was questionable if Jezebel herself would have been seen about with her, her doll-faced daughter, the Count de Cosimo, and a middle-aged man in the Foreign Office, were the other guests who had called that afternoon on Angela.

Dottie's little face had lengthened, for her playfellow had accidentally broken the leg of a soldier in a well-meant endeavour to straighten it. "He was a general," she said ruefully.

"Never mind, it gives us a better chance of winning the battle; he was a silly old buffer."

She looked up with amazed eyes wide open.

"A general couldn't be silly, could he?"

"Just couldn't he! and the worst of it is, there's seldom any one to tell him so."

"Teddy, stop flirting with Dottie and go and make music," his hostess said to him.

The child looked up gravely.

"Teddy and me's not flirting, we're 'musing ourselves."

"Same thing, my dear, spelt differently; one of the absurdities of the English language. Get up off the floor, Teddy, and do as I tell you. It's impossible for people to enjoy talking unless some one plays the piano."

"What shall I play."

"Anything, and you can sing if you like, we won't listen."

"Sing something pretty, sing about Mummie," said the child.

"What! and get my ears boxed, Dottie."

"Ah-h-" breathed Dottie, and, as a recent memory molested her, she unconsciously covered an ear with a tiny dimpled hand.

"Then sing something about soldiers," she whispered.

"To please you, Dottie, I'll combine them together, and if I'm punished, I look to you to save me."

The young fellow clambered to his feet, sprawled his fingers over the notes, struck some chords and sang to them:

"First she fancied a Lancer, and then a Borderer gay,

"Then a fellow from Portobello, a swell in the R. H. A.

"Next she fancied a Guardsman, whose heart and hands were free

"The short and the tall, she fancied them all, but she never could fancy me."

Teddy Oakes' eyes had unknowingly met those of the painted lady's daughter. She grew very hot, and nervously sought refuge in speech.

"What a sweet song! I love soldiers' songs, and seeing soldiers. Last week I saw some Lancers and their tin chest protectors were slithering in the gun-light, I mean they were glittering in the sun—no—"

"Try glittering in sunlight," said Angela soothingly. "A beautiful song, Teddy, and full of pathos, but the woman who doesn't fancy you must be a fool. Give her the chuck, and in sixteen years' time, I'll let you marry Dottie."

"I won't marry nothing," squealed Dottie much agitated. "I'm going to be a widow just like Mummie."

Every one laughed save old Mrs. Seligman, who showed symptoms of sorrow; and groping for her handkerchief in the mysteries of her skirts she produced a portion of her petticoat.

The poor soul still wore weeds for Seligman senior

who had breathed his last many years ago. People said that she had cribbed a cue from the woman who engraved upon her husband's tombstone that his widow would continue to carry on his bakery business; and that the old lady's trappings were a placard advertising the excellency of the crape that was manufactured in the prosperous factory her Moses had bequeathed to her. But this was venom, for she mourned her Jew sincerely, and the very word widow cut her to the quick.

Helping her mother-in-law to a plentiful supply of muffin, Angela warded off her woe, and she forgot it as she guarded her mantle from the melted butter. Dottie was despatched to the nursery. The painted lady, and the man from the Foreign Office settled down to scandal, and her daughter gaped at Teddy Oakes, who, having finished his tea, went back to the piano.

De Cosino drew his chair beside Angela's, and spoke to her moodily.

"And when are you going to throw a word to me? Have you unravelled the little bit of work you wove last night, oh Penelope?"

"Don't talk in riddles; it tires me."

"The same old story; when I don't tire, I bore you, and the sensation is only varied when I vex you."

"Well, don't kick the dog, he has done nothing to you."

She put out her hand and stroked her poodle's satin skin; bending, she let her flaxen curls mingle with the sable tuft that, gathered into a blue ribbon, sat upon the top of its head. The dog, delighted, fawned upon her; then she pinched its ears cruelly, and, whining with pain, it crept away from her."

"Why sit on the edge of your chair?" she said to De Cosino peevishly, "no one grudges you the whole of it; you'll fall into my lap in a moment, upset my tea and scandalize my mother-in-law."

"The first crime would be beyond forgiveness, the second I shouldn't have thought you'd have minded."

"I'd mind exceedingly. I don't wish the old woman to leave her money to her own tribe, and wipe out me and Dottie. If you don't sit up and amuse me, I'll go and play scales with Teddy."

"Don't do that. Tell me where you have been to-day, and what you have been doing."

"This afternoon I bicycled round the Regent's Park, and came to the conclusion that whatever the temptations the serpent holds out to women, he certainly never tempted them to ride a bicycle; he'd have thought of something more becoming."

"And this morning?"

"Oh! this morning—I had breakfast. But do ask Slater to keep his eye upon me. These answers are very fatiguing. Where have you been and what have you been doing? Now be happy, you've an excellent opening for talking about yourself."

De Cosimo folded his arms, bent forward, and watched her keenly. She was leaning back in her chair, with her hands clasped behind her head and her eyes half closed.

"This morning," he said, "I went down to Slough."

"How interesting!" she murmured drowsily and closed her eyes completely. "Will it all be just like this?"

"I travelled that far with Goliath, then I got out, and he went on."

The bright blue eyes opened, the red lips parted and Angela leaned forward.

"You mean . . ." she faltered, then waited, twitching with her fingers at the long jewelled chain that hung down from her throat.

De Cosimo gave a steely smile.

"I mean the man who monopolised you at the ball last night, I mean that savage Neil Vashon."

"And he was leaving Town—"

De Cosimo felt he could now retaliate with some safety.

"Apparently, as he was in the train. Never met such a fellow; there he was shouldering his own portmanteau. True, there was the devil of a crowd at Paddington; there were Royalties knocking about. Special trains and races somewhere, and it wasn't easy to get hold of a porter, but the fellow carried it along as if he liked it. I'm hanged if I'd have done it."

Angela looked at the pigmy and laughed maliciously, but thought better of telling him that a handbag might have been too heavy for him, and contented herself with saying:

"How absurd of him, it would have been much nicer, also cleaner, to have arrived at his journey's end with dusty boots, a doubtful collar and no means of changing them. Where was he going to?"

"I asked him was he leaving Town for long, and he grunted something about six weeks, and Canada, and put his horrid great boots up on the seat, turned his back and read the paper. I loathe the fellow."

"Don't blight his life by telling him so."

Angela stood up and her eyes flung scorn at him; then crossing the room with the swift light step that belonged to her, she sat down beside Teddy Oakes, who was still at the piano.

"Teddy, good boy. I have changed my mind, you can't dine with me to-night. Don't look so disappointed, and go on playing, for I don't want the others to hear me."

The young fellow looked up at her wistfully.

"But it's my last evening for ever so long. I must go home on leave to-morrow; I haven't seen my people for months, and somehow it hurts me to know that I don't want to."

"Go home, child, shoot rabbits, build castles on the beach if you've got one, and go nice long walks with your sisters; it's better for you."

"Perhaps so," said the young fellow innocently, "but I shan't care a bit about it, not like I used to, and I

used to love to spend my leave at home; but now I'm spoilt for anything that has not got you in it; even when I can't speak to you, I'm happy if I can only see you."

"Having metaphorically lived on dry champagne, you're not keen about thin claret; you're like the Irish priest, who said it was a mighty tedious liquor; but taken all round it's best for you, Teddy."

"Best or worst, I shall always hate anything apart from you," he said passionately. He coloured up to his eyes and his hands trembled on the piano. "And there is no hope for me; not the smallest chance, that you will . . ."

"Marry you," she answered, taking the word out of his mouth. "Not the smallest, my little piccaninni, so give up asking me. Can't you see the idea is an absurdity? For one thing you are years younger than I am, and while you would be capering about with a tennis bat, I should probably be paralyzed, wear pansies in a black lace cap, and be fully occupied trying to keep my false teeth quiet. For another thing, I have my eye on you for Dottie."

"You are laughing at me, but of course you think I'm an impudent idiot for daring to think of such a thing," he said miserably and thumped "Oh, listen to the band," still louder lest the others might overhear them.

Angela spoke with unusual earnestness, as she repudiated his accusation. He was of no use to her, so she did not want him, and the costly gifts he had crippled himself to give her were merely a passing interest to her; nevertheless, she liked the boy, and perchance it was counted to her as a small meed of righteousness that she had no definite desire to hurt him.

But Teddy had plucked the dangerous Dead Sea fruit that she dispensed with her own fair hands to all that sought her society, and its bitter-sweet taste could never be forgotten.

"And I may not dine with you to-night?"

"No, I want to be alone. I'm going to think. It's a thing I seldom do, and it won't be at all easy to do it."

Teddy's eyes went over to De Cosino.

"Not of him?"

"No, no," she cried and shivered as though a snail had crawled over her.

Angela was alone. Her visitors had long since left her. She had eaten a solitary dinner, an event rare in her vapid life's history, and now her thinking time had come. She drew her chair before the fire and planted her heels against the jamb of the mantel-shelf.

"I declare," she thought, "I'll become a public blessing, and patent a plan that will keep one's heels from slipping—some dodge that will make a neat little slab dart out for the support of them, and slide back when they want to come down again."

Calling her poodle, and bidding it lie still, she planted her feet upon its back, then deliberately commenced to plot a plan of campaign that would land her safely at her goal, and give her the victory over Neil Vashon. His money, desirable as it was, no longer seemed a main consideration. She longed for his name, she craved his love, with a craving she herself scarcely understood, and the knowledge that to obtain either was well-nigh impossible, made her yearn all the more for both. Not very many hours ago he had, in very unvarnished words, told her that he would have nothing to do with her, and unknowingly she was adopting the rôle of her own French poodle—the worse she treated it, the more it fawned upon her, licked and loved her; and the words Vashon had flung at her, had fanned the flame that now scorched her.

"But oh! we'd have been so poor if I'd married him," thought Angela as she endeavoured to condone her past trickery, "deadly poor. He'd have worn a seedy uniform, and at best an Engineer's kit is hideous, and shoddy boots with toes that turned up and looked as if

they grinned at him. We should have lived in a mangey little house in some horrible garrison, and it would have been furnished with some ghastly Jack-in-the-box sort of furniture that a soldier's wife once showed me. The poor thing was so pleased with it, and said it all packed up beautifully. Fearful and wonderful chairs were made out of table-legs, and a couple of sticks created umbrella stands. They travelled with their bed-clothes inside the bath; the top of it they used as a table, and when they'd done washing in it, they turned it upside down and sat upon it. The side-board was a packing case, and the bed came out of a cupboard. Poor soul; probably by now she has put a pudding dish on her head, and is enchanted because it does as a bonnet. I should have worn ready-made gowns, reached off a peg, and I should have lunched at the Stores whenever I went to London. We should have had children, boys probably, as they are the most expensive, that fell down stairs because there was no other place to keep them. And once a year the General would have asked us to dinner. He'd have been civil and silly, because in spite of my moth-eaten dress, he would have seen that I was pretty, and his wife would have patronized me and asked if the children had had measles. It's really as well I didn't marry Neil, I'm certain I'd have bitten her. And in years to come, Neil would have harnessed to a weighty wagonette the horse he'd ridden all the morning on duty, and I, and any children that hadn't broken themselves on the staircase, would have clambered into it, and proud Papa would have driven us out in the cruelty van. I have seen them do it. But oh! what a disgusting picture! It's made me feel quite morbid."

However, these reflection in no way helped her towards the goal she was bent on gaining, and for long a puzzled frown puckered up her forehead. Suddenly it left her, for a ray of light crossed her confusion, and Angela sat up and pushed away the poodle.

There was still a trump card in the mythical pack, and by a little manipulation and careful play, she might yet win the trick. The card depicted a hideous, green-eyed monster, called Jealousy, with horrible feelers wriggling from its body, feelers which, gathering round the hearts of men and women, contract and crush the joy of life out of them. And the more Angela thought of it, the more she determined that it should set its seal upon the heart of Neil Vashon. It was her last, but it was her best, chance, and she felt like a child who, having scraped all the jam off her tart, secures the highest satisfaction from her final spoonful.

It was through Vashon's own familiar friend that she would carry out her plan of action; he should be the *Deus ex machina* that should unravel the knotty coil, and crown her with the happiness of the gods.

The poodle beat its tail upon the floor as its mistress gave a quick laugh; then as she paced the room the plan which she told to herself began to take definite shape and form.

"Printheorpe, the artist, is his special friend; that much I have gathered. He will be shaggy, unkempt, and slack. But no matter! He will be all the easier to gain. It will be simple enough to get hold of him, for he shall paint my picture, and I'll see to it that he'll be very soon as much in love with me, as with it. Neil is away, that's good, otherwise I couldn't work it. Canada is a long way off; good again, he won't be back too soon, and I'm perfectly positive that he will be horribly put out, miserable and madly jealous when he discovers that his friend cares for me. A stranger he wouldn't care a snap about. Once I set a glimmer of jealousy alight, the rest is comparatively easy, and of his own accord Neil will come back to me. And, as I'd swear he is not the man to betray a woman's name; his friend will have no clue to my identity."

Up and down, backwards and forwards, Angela paced, weaving fresh interests into the plot she sketched so

roughly. She would be painted in a tea gown, she thought, perhaps in the one she now wore. She pulled out some rose-coloured folds of closely crimped pleating, looked into the glass, and thought she looked like a rosebud, the shade was so soft and tender. Here a new thought came to her. No! she would be painted in a white gown of some simple muslin, in the folds of her bodice there would nestle some sprigs of sweet lavender, her only ornament a valueless little turquoise ring upon her left hand's fourth finger.

The picture would revive old memories, that would re-echo in Vashon's heart; it would take its share of the task which lay before her.

CHAPTER VIII

ANGELA'S ADVANCES

Stephen Printhorpe's temper, that was by nature placid and sunny, had been somewhat short of late, and he received with irritation the man-servant's announcement that a lady had called to see him.

The man explained that he had shown the lady into the sitting-room; the paper-hangers were in the ante-room, and he thought his master might be busy in the studio. Printhorpe inwardly thought that it would have been far more agreeable if he had shown her out into the street. He made no haste to greet the visitor, who was turning round and about, touching, poking, and taking stock of all she saw.

"What an extraordinary collection," said Angela to herself, as standing on tip-toe she scanned the pictures. "Tod Sloane and St. Anna, and a pack of women dressed in little wreaths of roses smirking at the Madonna. It looks as if Neil were crazy and his friend a trifle shady."

She examined a group of china figures, and noted they were of the rarest Sèvres; fingered a gold snuff-box, and held to the light a Venetian goblet; stooping she slipped the silky strands of an angora rug through her fingers, and started back with a little cry as a battered and broken-nosed bulldog raised its head from the depth of the rug, showed a row of jagged teeth, and snarled at her.

"Why, it's Peter," she cried; "it's dear old Peter. Peter," she said, holding out her hand, "don't you re-

member me, little Angela? Was 'ems a dog 'ems," she coaxed, drifting into the pitiful drivel, that the wise as well as the foolish think adaptable to domestic pets and children. "Old beast, you're as hard as your master."

But Peter continued to slobber and snarl, and with a pettish gesture Angela pelted the old dog with a white violet. Then walking to the window she considered the plan of campaign she had laid out so carefully. She had even planned the start of surprise and dismay that was to convulse her on the day that Neil would meet her in the studio, and the quivering voice in which she would urge that she had never connected him as being identical with the man who shared his house with his friend. Here lay the weakest point in the whole plot. So weak was it, that Angela bit her red lips and drew her brows together as she dwelt upon it's frailty.

"I wonder, will it wash," she pondered thoughtfully, then beat her foot impatiently upon the floor. "I shall develop into a drivelling idiot and walk about with my tongue lolling out, if I keep on worrying at it."

Hearing the touch of a hand on the door-handle she turned eagerly, and for a moment she and Printhorpe stared at one another. Then she smiled, coloured up, and came forward.

"I have come," she began, paused, and gave a little silvery laugh. "Oh, you are such a surprise! The only other artist I have ever seen, I mean real artist with a well-known name, had a suet coloured skin, and his hair hung down in long black strands like the long bits on a poodle, and he came into the room with one of those horrible brown Homburg hats on his head, and he had paint in his finger nails, and somehow I fancied you would be something like him."

"I am exceedingly sorry to disappoint you," said Printhorpe somewhat stiffly.

"Oh, but you don't! You please me and the poodle-man revolted me."

"She's laying it on a bit thick whoever she is," thought Printhorpe, as his eyes took in the charming effect of the chinchilla toque that rested on his visitor's pretty fair hair, of the Neapolitan-mauve shade of her cloth dress edged with the same soft fur, and the clusters of white and mauve violets that were fastened in her waist and on her muff, and filled the whole room with their fragrance.

"And now," cried Angela, "I must get to business, or you'll wonder what on earth I've come for; indeed it's written all over your face that you're wondering that much now."

The good humour had come back into Printhorpe's eyes and he smiled as he answered her.

"Then I hope that my pleasure is printed as plainly. I'm seldom the recipient of such an honour, for being a busy man my visitor's are few and—"

"And you wish I'd go," interposed Angela.

"On the contrary," laughed Printhorpe, and he said the words as though he meant them, "I'm barbarously rude and remiss," he added, drawing a chair for her before the fire, "I'm a savage never to have asked you to sit down."

Angela sat back in the chair, put her small patent leather shoes upon the fender, and looked up at him.

"I want to know if you will paint my picture;" then seeing his movement of dissent she went on quickly "I will fit my time entirely to yours; everything shall give way to your arrangements if only you will soon begin to paint it."

Printhorpe shook his head decidedly.

"I fear your request is impossible; just now I'm doing no work whatever."

"Then does not that fact allow you all the more leisure for acceding to it?" she faltered.

Again she extended an insinuating hand towards Peter, who snarled and made a hideous face at her; then whined reproachfully as his master's friend punished him.

Printhorpe paused. She was certainly very pretty, so pretty it would be quite a pleasure to paint her. He spoke with somewhat less decision.

"Notwithstanding your kind consideration, I am unwilling to start upon a picture that I might not complete for months, for at present I'm not in the mood for close attention to my work; and even if I did agree to commence it, I can see no prospect of arranging a time to go on with it. I have promised the friend I live with to go on a yachting cruise with him on his return from Canada, and we are neither of us tied for time."

Angela's colour came and went and she plucked little tufts of fur off her muff while she thought of the unexpected obstacle that confronted her. That the artist would refuse to paint her seemed little short of a tragedy; such an emergency had never entered her calculations. But she noted that he had showed slight symptoms of wavering, and the main point was to induce him to commence the picture.

She stood up, held out her hand as though she intended to bid him good-bye, and felt quite convinced that as yet she would not say it.

"Forgive me for having disturbed you, and I must try and get over my failure; but it will be hard, for I had set my heart upon your being the means of my giving a great delight to my adored old father. I simply hugged the thought of presenting him with a portrait of myself that you had painted."

She put her muff to her lips lest their trembling should betray her. The sudden inspiration of the blind old man who, long ago in his dotage, would have paid no heed to her, much less to her picture, was really very funny. Controlling herself, she drew out a visiting card and watched him as he glanced at it.

"If you should reconsider my request, my town address will always find me."

Watching him intently she saw that no change came

over his face, and knew that it was as she had believed it would be. Even from his familiar friend Neil Vashon had withheld her name. The contrast of her own treason, as compared with his honour and staunch loyalty, came vividly before her, and at that moment her longing for the love she had lost rose to a higher and a purer level than it ever yet had reached; and the mist of tears, now shining in her eyes, was not born of deceit or mockery. She turned aside her head and brushed them away, and the next words from Printhorpe, who had noted their soft glisten, dried them completely.

"At all events I might arrange for the first few sittings," he said in an undertone.

Angela was apparently deaf to his words, but she heard quite clearly.

"Could I," she asked with a pretty pleading, "Oh, might I be allowed to see your studio? You don't know how much it would interest me to see the inside of it."

"I fancy you will find that the man with the poodle-hair and Homburg hat has one very like it," laughed Printhorpe, as he opened the door for her, and not unwillingly led the way to the studio.

Under cover of the dimness of a passage she put a couple of questions.

"And your friend, has he gone away for long?"

"A month or six weeks, not more."

"And you have good news of him?" she continued in the tone of one whose politeness prompts her to pursue a topic of no interest.

"As yet I have had none. We are neither of us adepts at letter writing; a wire supplies our need, and we keep what we have to say till we meet."

Up jumped Angela's spirits; they reached the top hole of the limit. The two men's antipathy to writing letters wiped away all chance of Neil's untimely interference, and she would see to it that the picture once

begun would be finished in time for him to behold it. The simple dress, the sprigs of sweet lavender would recall the past with a potency denied to the diamonds and the flashing dress of flame-colour; they would bore their way right into the very depth of his heart, and the green-eyed monster would do the rest.

At a glance Angela took in the surroundings of the studio; they were simple, workmanlike, and of interest only to their owner. Catching sight of a portrait that hung upon an easel, she exclaimed at it—

"I am positively sick of such pictures. Every woman I know has had herself painted with a bare throat, a hat heavy laden with feathers on her head, and a *fichu* flung over her shoulders, or failing that, they have had themselves photographed, for there is a regular epidemic of them. I fancy they labour under the delusion that they've only got to produce a throat, a rag of lace and a top-heavy hat in order to look like Gainsborough's Duchess of Devonshire. They seem to think in mere detail that they haven't a trace of her face; and as to this woman! Why, it's a positive stretch of good nature to say that she's only plain."

"I'm ignorant enough to consider Miss Paignton's portrait to be one of my very best pictures," said Printhorpe not a little huffily.

"And why not? You might paint a perfect representation of a strangled cat, but it wouldn't necessarily be a pleasing picture." She touched his arm lightly with her muff, and looked up at him, with a pretty hesitating anxiety, that made Printhorpe feel it was futile to be angry with her. Reassured, she rattled on airily, "I know some people called Paignton. They live at the back of beyond, take occasional flights up to town, and talk about the season. A mother of innumerable daughters, and a son with a frivolous seat on a horse; he always falls off out hunting." She glanced again at the picture. "Of course they are the same, I recognize the pattern."

"And you like them?" questioned Printhorpe, not that her reply would hold the smallest interest, but he felt it behoved him to say something.

"Well, I wouldn't borrow money to spend upon them," laughed Angela softly. "But really I know very little about them."

Crossing the room, she scrutinized an immense stretch of closely covered canvas that lay propped against the wall, and Printhorpe, who had followed her, watched anxiously lest she should endeavour to draw away the covering. But for the moment she was too much engrossed with her own thoughts to notice it. Her mind was intent upon discovering the quickest means of gaining her end, which was still in the dim distance, although her visit had already outstretched all limits.

The man-servant's announcement that Lady Paignton was in the waiting-room upset her careful calculations.

"Dine with me to-night," cried Angela hastily. "I know my invitation is unconventional, but if I can induce you to come, you'll give me great pleasure. Now don't grope about for an excuse. I always know when men who are free try to hunt up a fetter."

"I'm sorry, but it is impossible," he began decisively—then his voice trailed away as the door opened to admit Lady Paignton and her several yards of daughters.

"So bold of us to come up," piped the mother-bird, "but your man told us."

She stopped short and fixed an awful eye on Angela, who, nothing abashed, went forward to greet her, and was rewarded with a curt bow and a smile of the painful kind that stiffens a face, when the teeth crunch down upon raw red currants.

Angela Selignan drew her gloves slowly over her small white fingers, and, watching her, Printhorpe felt furious with the woman who had hurt her. In a moment of time, this undeniably charming-looking stranger would have left the house where her request had been refused her, and where his friends had practi-

cally insulted her. Almost anxiously he watched her fasten the last glove button and gather her silvery fur closely about her throat.

The old lady, having fumbled in a black hand-bag, produced a note and held it towards Printhorpe.

"I wrote it lest you should be out, but 'tis to say we hope you'll excuse short notice and dine with us to-night quite quietly," she added as an alluring sop, and the daughters murmured a little variety chorus of "quietly quite."

Visions of a long cold drive, an indifferent dinner, a dreary evening, during which each Miss Paignton would in her turn tickle the notes of the piano, floated before Printhorpe. The vision was an ugly one, he made haste to decline.

"Many thanks, but to-night I am engaged."

"To dine with me," said the clear, cool voice that came from Angela.

It might be that her audacity took away the breath with which he would have denied it, or perhaps it was the wish to shield her from a further hurt, for contradict her he could not, and he felt that to argue the point now would be an impossibility. He hastily wedged a remark into the thick of an uncomfortable silence. Pointing to a picture, he addressed himself to his guests in general.

"This is one of my greatest finds. I picked it up in a pawn-shop, had it cleaned, and discovered it was a Peter Lely."

The old lady groped vainly for her pince-nez, and peered dimly at the picture.

Peter Lely! You don't say so! Why, I should have said it was a lady."

Printhorpe dared not laugh. He glanced at Angela, saw that her shoulders were shaking, and strange little noises came from her throat; turning hastily, he addressed himself to Lady Paignton.

"Oh yes, thank you," answered the old woman, "the

girls are having a charming time in town, most delightful. I assure you there's nothing to be done in London that they have not done thoroughly."

"How wonderful!" murmured Angela, apparently to the little green monkey that formed the knob of her umbrella. "What wide possibilities! I fancied that I'd done most things, but even I have drawn the line sometimes!"

The old lady turned her back upon her, and addressed her speech pointedly to Printhorpe.

"This afternoon was beyond all things pleasant. We attended Miss Jones' address upon her missionary work in China. Such work! Such a stirring address! She is indeed a model woman." The final words were flung at Angela.

"Oh," cooed Angela, in a voice full of enthusiasm, but the devilment in her eyes had grown deeper. "A model woman! I had no idea there were such things in the world. Why, a model woman is barely probable, whereas," she waved her muff towards Sir Peter Lely's picture, "a woman's model is probably bare."

A few moments later Printhorpe put the pretty sinner into the Victoria that awaited her. Angela held out her hand frankly.

"I'm sorry I scared them away, so sorry, but the old woman looked at me with her face all puckered up like a fried shoe, and really I couldn't stand it." She fixed upon him her bright questioning eyes; "Then it's *au revoir* till eight o'clock to-night? For I'm not going to let you off."

"Thank you," said Printhorpe simply, and he stood on the steps till the fair head and silvery chinchilla *toque* were whirled out of sight.

CHAPTER IX

A PERILOUS PAUSE

MARCH, which had come in gusty and chill, with fitful gleams of sunshine that, like a cold sarcastic smile on a beautiful face, half revealed and half concealed the sting beneath it, had almost blustered out again. Mrs. Seligman's portrait, which was begun in a desultory, half-hearted mood, was almost completed; a touch here and there, chiefly to the poppies which nodded their red heads round her, and to the blue sky above her, was all that was needed. Never had Printhorpe painted with more skill and speed.

Vashon's absence had left him lonely. His bitter disappointment in the picture he had set such store by had stamped him with a sense of failure; day by day had drifted away, leaving no reward for hours of anxious quest, and Angela Seligman had worked her way into his life at a time when to him it seemed empty. She, and her laughter-loving companionship, had suddenly slipped into it and occupied some of the niches. Like the child who, having clamoured to clutch the moon, is partly pacified with a penny toy, so Printhorpe accepted the toy which Satan sent him.

Angela Seligman had soon begun to see that she must spread her silken fishing net very cunningly, that this exceedingly handsome young artist would be a very difficult fish to land; a sudden jerk, an over-reaching throw, and he would disappear and refuse to rise again, fished she never so wisely. But her heart being set on ultimate success, she deftly inserted some

grains of common sense into her conversation, she sand-papered her most daring speeches lest their audacity might offend him, and she certainly succeeded in never boring him. And the majority of men would better put up with a woman who abused them, than one who bored them.

To-night Printhorpe was dining with her, and she and her child were waiting to receive him.

Gleams of excitement now frequently crossed the little maid's life. She had almost forgotten Teddy Oakes, who had always been the one to emancipate her from the dullness of the nursery, for there was now a new friend who invariably wished to see her. Once Printhorpe had proposed that, with her tiny arms clinging round her mother's neck, she should be inserted in the picture, and the mother's decided objection had somewhat surprised him.

As the hands of the clock pointed to half-past seven Angela threw herself back in her chair and proceeded to drape herself with Dottie. She pressed her curly head down upon her breast, artistically arranged her dainty little skirts and then clasped her own white arms around her.

"I fink a pin is pricking my face, Mummie," said Dottie who, unused to the position, felt rather smothered.

"There is no pin, little silly."

"I fink, Mummie, I'll sit on a chair. It's a little piece hot."

"Lie still, ungrateful little cat."

Dottie whimpered.

"Quiet, and you shall have chocolate," said Angela hastily, for she heard a step on the stairs. The door opened, and she looked up and smiled at Printhorpe.

He was very much at home in the little house, where, ever since the first night she had entrapped him into it, his hostess had made him so welcome.

Frequently he dined alone with her, but to-night there were other guests expected.

"Do come some little time before the rest, and have a talk with me, and see your friend Dottie," she had that morning said to him.

Printhorpe looked down with pleasure at the very pretty picture that had been arranged for his benefit, and in the certain knowledge that it would appeal to him.

Stooping down he patted the child's small foot and fastened her tiny shoe-string.

"You look fairly comfortable, little one," he said, and standing upright he smiled at her.

• Visions of chocolate creams kept Dottie quiet, also the sandman was tickling her eyes, and her mother ran her fingers through the child's clustering curls, and thought with satisfaction that the firelight was playing on her own fair face and on the little face that was a miniature of her own. She pointed to a low chair close beside her, and Printhorpe, taking it, idly turned over the pages of a fashion paper.

"I'm sick of that woman and wish to goodness some man would marry her and take her out of the paper; she's been smirking in it for years," said Angela, putting a finger on one of Peter Robinson's advertisement widows, who looked highly delighted with her weeds. "What have you been doing with yourself all day?"

"Talking to you, haven't I?"

"Of course you have. I forgot. Let me see, this morning we went to the New Gallery, and met Mother Paignton and her appalling son, and the old woman made faces at us; that son should have been drowned at birth like a mongrel puppy in a barrel of water. I'm certain he's the man who looked into a glass and straightway forgot what manner of man he was, for he wouldn't have the audacity to show himself if he remembered. Then this afternoon I came to your

studio, and you put some little dabs of blue into my eyes, and touched up some poppies."

He looked up at her and wondered, as he had wondered many times, at the sweet, almost anxious, look that shadowed her eyes whenever she sat for her picture; at other times they were so mocking, mischievous and daring.

"The picture is almost finished," said Angela absently.

"Almost, just a few more touches."

"How unwilling you were to begin it!"

"I was not in the mood for beginning anything."

"Why not? Tell me what had worried you."

Printhorpe turned the subject aside.

"You have been very kind to me," he said warmly, "kinder than any one has ever been, and you have helped me to tide over the time of Vashon's absence. I'm so looking forward to your meeting him. He seldom goes anywhere, and he hates women, but you somehow are different."

A faint flush came to Angela Seligman's face, and it was her turn to let a subject go by. She never encouraged him to talk of his friend, to do so would have been to court danger. In silence she looked at Printhorpe, and a thought, not altogether foreign, was stirred within her. How would it be to attach herself permanently to him and to let go all thought of Neil Vashon? He was certainly somewhat dense and slow of understanding, he was matter of fact and exceedingly English, but with a quick sigh she cast the idea aside, and knew she would barter a thousand love-words from his lips for one kindly smile from Neil Vashon.

A swift dash of rain drops struck like small shot upon the window.

"It must be horrid out," said Angela, rousing herself.

"What matter, it's perfect in."

Slowly Printhorpe's eyes travelled over the harmoni-

ous shades of pale and deeper-toned yellow; the bowls of Niphotos roses, orchids and other costly flowers; then they came back to, and stayed with, the most striking and brilliant thing in all the room, the mother whose arms now sheltered a sleeping child; and a thought, newly-born to-night, stirred suddenly within him. Quickly he sought to banish it. Was he, with his boasted indifference to women, to forget and forego his attitude of reserve for a woman who charmed, perplexed, and at times jarred upon him? Was he not wedded to his art, and had vowed to dedicate his whole life towards its perfection? He moved away from the temptation of the white jewelled hand so near his own, stood up, and spoke of Dottie.

"She has found us too dull for her," he said, and heard the uneven sound in his voice.

"I must rouse her, the mother will be here in a minute," replied Angela, who also had heard it. "The iceberg is melting nicely," she thought, "but it's high time he did."

She shook up Dottie who, lovely and flushed with sleep, muttered "chocolate creams," then slid swiftly to her feet, for the Count de Cosimo was greeting her mother, and pilfering the greater part of a box of chocolate creams, slipped unseen from the room.

The two men looked at one another with the uncertain gaze of dogs who, with an equal right to the pavement, resent the presence of the other.

"That poisonous little boulder here again," thought Printhorpe.

"She's got the swaggering painter-fellow well in tow," said the angry heart of de Cosimo.

They greeted each other with a sufficient show of courtesy. De Cosimo said the night was beastly, and the other did not contradict him; and an old gentleman, so thin that his bones clicked like castanettes, and his wife, so fat that she almost blocked the doorway, prevented any further amenities. These were followed by the painted lady and her daughter, and a couple of passable-looking

girls, a gaunt middle-aged woman, with mannish stride and hair cut short, and three young men of an ordinary make and pattern.

Watching her opportunity, Angela whispered to de Cosimo.

"The General must sit one side of me, and Mr. Printhorpe the other; you are at home here, you see, and they are the strangers.

De Cosimo saw it but dimly; unlike Dottie, he was unsatisfied with sugary comforts.

"They are a deadly lot," apologised Angela under her breath to Printhorpe, as they sat at dinner. "But I was bound to ask the General—Skinny Jimmy they call him—for he gives me tickets for the Artillery concerts, which I hand on to people that bore me badly, and they keep them quiet. The woman opposite—really a clown isn't in it with the decoration of her face, gives the best of parties and never forgets me, and her daughter and the other girls do to play with the other men, who, like the squirrels, enjoy nibbling young green things. Then I asked the masculine female because the trash she talks amuses the rest; listen, she's at it now, I caught the words 'woman's emancipation.' When woman begins to rant upon that subject, you may always take it as a sign that she knows it's a thousand to one against any man offering to chain her to him. And de Cosimo, well, I asked him because—"

Angela stopped short, feeling that she was going too fast.

"And where do I come in?" quoted Printhorpe lightly.

A long look from under her lashes answered him.

"Who's talking of heaven?" she questioned suddenly, becoming conscious it was time she distributed her attention.

"We were wondering whether there would be salted almonds there," giggled one of the girls, helping herself from a silver dish.

"I fancy," said Angela, "we shall have all we most want, always supposing any of us ever get there."

"And in the other place we shall be fed up with what we like least," said some one.

"Then I shall spend Eternity shopping at the Stores with my mother-in-law; I did it once," groaned Angela, "and the sights and smells are still fresh. We were hunted from baby-cloths to bacon, and when we doubled we got into a chemist's shop, and were chivied into a toy shop, past dust-pans, back to the bacon. It aged me terribly."

"I shall dance through immortality in tight shoes," murmured a young lady.

"And I shall be everlasting crossing the Bay of Biscay," added one of the men.

The general looked up gravely.

"I shall burn slowly in a dirty ill-ventilated room at the War Office, signing endless slips of paper, racking my brains till they are fit to split, striving to please everyone, and getting slanged for my pains. I've spent some years there, and this is what it did for me," he shot out a skinny wrist. "Jove! if it's going to be like the War Office, I'll pull myself together lest I get there."

"I," said de Cosimo clearly, "shall endure perpetual torture watching the work of Penelope."

Angela adroitly averted explanation.

"And you," she said, turning quickly to Printhorpe.

"I? Oh, I shall be for ever looking for what I cannot find, and longing for what I cannot get."

"Surely you would have very little difficulty in getting anything you really wanted," she answered in a tone that he alone could hear.

"There you are wrong; I fear the thing I most want will never come to me."

As he spoke he looked at her, but his thoughts were far away from her. She heard the gravity that had come into his voice.

"Some day," she said, "I think you will be satisfied."

"Do you really?" Printhorpe looked at her eagerly. "It puts hope into me your saying so."

Inwardly Angela laughed; the iceberg was melting quickly. The General was making enquiries about her picture, and flushed with success she made a false step, and invited those present to come and see it in Printhorpe's studio. Had she glanced at his face, she might have put a drag-wheel on her speech; not doing so, she rattled away headlong.

"And amongst us we'll find courage to pull off a cloth that he has wrapped round a great stretch of canvas that stands with its face to the wall like a naughty child. I'm afraid to do it by myself."

A chorus of voices badgered Printhorpe to tell them what was painted upon the picture he had covered so carefully. They would drag away the covering by force, they said, and laughed loudly.

A deep anger rose and swelled quickly within him. They were like mosquitoes buzzing round a wounded spot. Most of all he was angry with Angela; it was execrable taste on her part to draw public attention to a subject that he had many times given her to understand was private. He felt suddenly out of touch with her and her surroundings, and for the first time since he had known her the evening passed away heavy-footed. Ignoring her hint that he should be the last to leave, he left before the majority of her guests, and walked home with thoughts that seldom ceased to haunt him. Thoughts of months of wasted work, of days and nights of bitter disappointment and of vain longings for the fulfilment of a hope that seemed more than ever hopeless.

CHAPTER X

A TIME OF TENSION

THE hansom that had driven Stephen Printhorpe to the dainty spider's-web in Park Street, had passed Neil Vashon's, speeding on its way from Euston to Piccadilly, but as neither had glanced in the direction of the other, the chance of mutual recognition had come to nothing. A fleck of mud that the wheels had deposited on Printhorpe's coat had fully engaged his attention, and Vashon's eyes were bent on the flickering match that he was guiding to his cigarette.

The expectation of taking his friend by surprise gave Vashon pleasure. It was his custom to drop in upon him unawares, and it had not occurred to him to announce the early settlement of his business. In that, lay the charm of the home he had set up with Printhorpe. It gave companionship without ties or restraints. He went away at will, and knew that a glad welcome back would always await him.

"Dear old fellow, I should feel like a lost dog without him," thought Vashon as he fitted his latch-key into the lock.

"Dining out, is he?" he said to the servant he summoned. "At the club, of course; I'll follow him there," he added and bounded up the stairs without waiting for further speech.

A long-drawn whine and a succession of quick barks from Peter enticed him into the sitting room.

"Good old dog, best of old chums, so you're glad I'm back, are you?" He stooped and gave the battered old dog some kindly smacks. "What, as glad as all that?"

For Peter rolled over on his back, and waved his legs in an ecstasy in the air, and then bounded frantically against his master, who was now turning over a couple of letters that awaited him upon the mantel-shelf.

Being of no interest he flung them back, and idly picked up, and looked at the small square of snowy cambric that was lying beside them. From it a breath of white rose was wafted towards him; the faint, sweet scent rekindled the memory of something now almost forgotten. He turned the little handkerchief, and mechanically searched for the initial that was embroidered upon it, the first alphabetical letter entwined with tiny rose buds. His brow twitched impatiently, the breath of scent almost sickened him, and he flung down the handkerchief as though it burned him, but then picked it up again. Why, of course, it belonged to one of Stephen's models, and it were pointless to let Peter tear it.

"You'd make very short work of it, wouldn't you, old boy?" he cried, holding it high above the dog's reach. "Whose is it, the little Siamese lady's, the giddy young chorus girl's? Oh! Why, perhaps he has tracked and captured the fly-by-night damsel with the ideal face. Just won't he be pleased with himself if he's run her to earth, and dug her out of the burrow. I'll go and see what he's done with that picture. Wonder if he'd mind my taking a look at it? Not he! Of course not."

Vashon put back the handkerchief, gave it a kindly little pat, and with Peter following hard at heel, he strode towards the studio.

It was in darkness, and he felt his way cautiously, till, turning on the light, he looked round for the picture that Printhorpe had marred so ruthlessly. But the picture stood just as he had last left it, against the wall and down upon the ground, and raising the cloth that covered it, he saw that the heavy streak of paint yet lay upon the angel's face.

"He's a foolish fellow, Peter, and I suppose he's still rambling round the Embankment. Well, I'll soon put a stop to that little game. Good God! It's Angela!"

For Vashon's eyes had fallen full upon the portrait that was balanced upon an easel at the further end of the room.

"Angela," he scarcely whispered.

Drawing nearer to it, his arms fell heavily to his side and standing, with his massive figure as if turned to stone, he stared at the life-like face and the eyes that looked as though they pleaded with his own, now troubled and full of thought. Angela was right. The picture was doing its share of the work she set such store by. It was rapidly retracing lines that had years ago been sponged from off the tablets of his memory.

"Little Angela, Angel."

Again he called her very softly, and the half parted lips seemed to answer him.

Every line and detail in the picture was vivid and familiar. The village church, its rustic porch and slated spire. The country-side smiling in a masque of summer light, that winnowing its way through the green and sulphur shaded leaves of a sycamore tree, let fall its rays upon the figure of a woman standing beneath it. Scarlet poppies, golden buttercups, meadow-sweet, and placid-faced moon-daisies, profusely studded the grass that surrounded her. A cerulean sky flecked with indolent white and fleecy clouds spread a canopy above her. A pure white muslin dress clad her with a sweet simplicity, and some sprigs of pale lavender nestled against her. With her left hand she shadowed her eyes, which were blue as the turquoise ring that encircled its third finger, and those questioning eyes looked wistfully at the man who had once so dearly loved them, and the red lips he had so often kissed silently pleaded with him for a renewal of his love. The picture was doing the work allotted to it, its fascination was fast creeping over him.

But soon a shadow stole over Vashon's face, that growing deeper did not pass away again. He drew back and turned away his eyes, for the radiance of the picture seemed to hurt and blind them. Restlessly, as one in pain, he moved his head from side to side, and mentally wrestled with a memory that, driving away one that was tender, now pierced his soul, cutting it like a poignard, and wounding it keenly. The shadow on his face grew darker; he compressed his lips as though to bite back the curse that rose thickly in his throat, a curse upon the fair-faced woman in her white youth and girlish innocence. For, as he gazed upon her, encircled in the old familiar setting, there arose within his mind another scene that blotted out all other memories of her. His thoughts went back to a sun-scorched day in the far away Rocky mountains, when he had knelt beside a lair of leaves, upon which a man lay a-dying. A fierce delirium had got its grip upon him, and his fingers sought feverishly for the weapon hidden from him. The natives had told Vashon of the evil plight of a fellow-countryman, and he had journeyed many a league to search for him, and had waited beside him doing what little could be done to alleviate his agony, and listening to the cry of "Angela! Angel! I trusted you!" that rang out over the mountains. As the last flicker of sunset faded, the voice had grown querulous, and too weak to speak the words that the dying eyes spoke so plainly. But Vashon had understood, and had guided the failing fingers to the miniature that lay upon the poor panting breast. At night-fall he had buried the man, laying the miniature where he had found it. The numbness of indifference had, long before that day, paralysed his own soul, and his eyes, as they looked down at the woman's winsome face, that pillowed on the dead, shone so fair and frail in the silver majesty of moonlight, were hard, cold, and callous to the familiar sight of its beauty.

Slowly the scene shifted. With a swift, savage

movement Vashon flung himself away from the picture, and his thoughts went out to Printhorpe.

What devil's work had been enacted in his absence? What evil eye had fixed upon his friend, and drawn him over to this woman whom none might trust? Had she not sufficient spoils, that she must seek him, only to treat him as she had treated her other whims? Could it be that Printhorpe, having learnt her treachery towards himself, had yet sought her friendship? Quickly Vashon drove away that thought as one unworthy of them both. But what did it all mean? Well, he knew that it was not without premeditation that Angela Seligman had planned for her picture those details of her early home, the countryside, the simple dress that had adorned her unsophisticated youth, the little ring with which they had pledged their troth. Why had she elected to come to his house? Why had she singled out his friend from among all other artists? The more he puzzled, the less he understood, and the meaning of Angela Seligman's action, which would have been transparent enough to a man more self-conceited, less unpretentious, remained concealed to him.

But it might be that he was over-rating a risk, and he remembered Printhorpe's vaunted indifference to women, and his boast that, to him, they were but effigies helpful to the perfection of his art. These were pleasant thoughts. Stephen was too good a friend, too valuable a man, to be lightly let tangle himself in that woman's web. He looked up as his servant approached him, warning him it was close upon eight o'clock, and wishing to know would his master dine at home. No, Vashon would dine at the club with Printhorpe.

"Ah, not at the club, then he's dining with friends," said Vashon, making quick reply to the man's discreet correction.

With an abrupt sign Vashon dismissed him. Involuntarily the man had glanced at Angela Seligman's picture and the glance annoyed him exceedingly.

With a short vexed sigh Neil Vashon sat down in the club to dinner, and ate it with thoughts that were moody as his face, which did not grow brighter when, having got up from the table, a man joined him before the fire.

"Hullo, David! back again. Where's Jonathan?"

"Meaning Printhorpe?" replied the other curtly. The man was no friend of his; he had little liking for him.

"Well, Printhorpe, if you like it better. He hasn't dined here for ages. He was flitting down Bond Street this afternoon, doing himself proud in an uncommon smart Victoria, and an uncommon smart woman sitting beside him. I knew her myself some years ago; she was then married to the Jew Seligman."

"Bring cigars, Conchas," broke in Vashon irrelevantly, and as the waiter was close at hand, unnecessarily loudly. He took some time before he selected a cigar to his liking, and turning his back to the club gossip, who by reason of his capacity for seeing and hearing things not intended for him, had been christened "the fly on the ceiling," he sat down in a distant corner, and took up the *Pall Mall Gazette*.

"I left him fed up with the thought of chasing moonshine. I come home and find he's enjoying himself playing with poison," thought Vashon, and angrily rustled the leaves of the paper. "Hang it all! he's old enough to look after himself and Dolly must slide if he wants to. I'm a fool to bother my head about him."

Then laying back his head Vashon proceeded to bother it intensely. As in the beginning, when Adam and Eve most valued the ease of Paradise, after they had been driven out of it, so it will be till the end, and we shall prize and set greater store by a thing when we have lost, or are on the way to losing it. And deeply as Vashon valued Printhorpe's friendship, he was surprised at his own grief evoked by the haunting thought that he was about to lose it. For it might be

that the woman had flung such a glamour over Stephen, and such gold dust in his eyes, that even the knowledge of her treachery towards himself, even his tale of the far-away mountain, might come too late to save him. Then assuredly would the bond of their fellowship be broken. The friendship might fail him, even as the other rays of light that slanting awhile across his life, had been dispelled like the will-of-the-wisp sun spangles that scutter at a breath; and he would have to accept its loss as his habitual lot, and grope his way patiently through a life darker for the want of it, if only there were a chance that his friend's entanglement would weigh the scales down in his happiness. But knowing full well that bitter regrets would soon weigh them heavily down to the very ground, Neil Vashon set himself to consider a plan that was gradually unfolding itself before him, one that would blow away the gold dust out of Printhorpe's eyes. As a scroll of paper that, unrolled and made straight, lays bare the writing traced upon it, his scheme for his friend's salvation unfurled itself before him. But so repellant was it, that he put it away from him, and for long he dared not even consider it. Must he stretch out his hand to this woman, and woo her back to his side? He knew he had but to hold it out, and she would drop into the hollow of it, as a plum ripe for the picking. What then? He would gain the woman he despised in exchange for the man he loved, who would scorn him as a thief. And if he gained her, what if she elected to remain in his grasp? Was he to act as a scoundrel to her, because she had broken faith with him? Vashon's face grew grey at the alternative. Must he walk through life with her as a drag upon him? The memory of the white-robed woman with questioning eyes had faded, but the memory of the woman with the flaming dress, with the hardened, hungry face, was vivid before him.

Neil Vashon sat long and considered, with his elbow

on his knee, his head on his hand, his eyes staring into the fire, and a heavy gloom overshadowing his face. He had weighed the scheme in the balance.

"Stephen is too valuable a man to be wasted, and I—well, no matter about me. I've tried life all round, and found it wanting, and I'll do my level best, or rather worst, to save him." Passing his friends, and fellows, with the very briefest of greetings he left the club.

Walking laggingly down the steps, he came face to face with Printhorpe racing up them.

"You old fox," he cried in high delight. "A pretty trick you've played me. I got in to hear you'd come back and had gone out. Why the mischief didn't you wire me to expect you?"

"Thought I'd surprise you," Vashon answered and thought, "A pleasant sort of surprise he's given me."

"Don't you play that game again. Hang it all, old fellow, I'd have stayed at home to greet you."

"Would you?" said Vashon dryly, and tried to take a look at him.

"Why, certainly. Never was more surprised in my life when I found old Peter squatting in the studio mounting guard over your gloves. By the way," he continued in a voice full of enthusiasm, "what did you think of my picture? Ripping, isn't it? I've never done anything to beat it."

Vashon drew away the arm that he had linked in Printhorpe's.

"I left you fit to cut your throat because you were unsatisfied with the work that you'd been at for months. I come back to find you've clean forgotten all about it."

Printhorpe stared up at him.

"Forgotten! What do you mean?" he said blankly,

"What I say. It's precisely as it was when I last saw it."

Printhorpe resented Vashon's curtness and extraordinary inconsistency, which fitted so ill with his

advice which just before leaving he had given him; urging him to think no more of the defaced picture until they returned from the yachting trip they purposed taking together. He answered with some heat.

"Yes, it remains as it was, because there was nothing more that I could do to it. And I'm exceedingly glad that I took up other work, that most certainly has not disappointed me." Then the ruffle went out of his voice, anger had no abiding place in him. "I don't know when I have painted a portrait that has given me such unfeigned pleasure."

There was a short, uncomfortable silence such as had never before disturbed them, then each began to inwardly reproach himself; Vashon waxed angry at his own churlishness. What folly to jar on Stephen's feelings; rather than make the most of the friendship which was yet his. And Printhorpe felt vexed at his own small show of temper; how pettish he had been to show it so plainly. He hastened to disperse the cloud that had arisen between them, and spoke cheerily.

"You'll be amused at my new departure. I've been airing myself in society since you left me. Come on and I'll tell you all about it; we'll smoke up in the studio."

"No, no," broke in Vashon, "not there." Quickly he changed his mind. "Yes, of course, we'll smoke in the studio, and you can tell me all your doings," he added, and shut the door of his house with an unconscious impatience.

Looking at him in a brighter light, Printhorpe saw revealed in his face a harshness that he had never seen before, and it troubled him. Things had gone amiss with Neil; he would bear with him very gently.

"There! look at it, isn't it charming?" he said. They had come into the studio, and putting a hand on Vashon's shoulder he half pushed him towards the picture. "'Pon my word, I'm a bit proud of it, and it's

not a bit prettier than its subject." He paused and made a great effort to keep his vexation out of his voice. "You're not very appreciative, old man, I'm sorry I bored you with it."

Printhorpe turned away, and leaning his elbow on the mantel-shelf he hummed a meaningless little song, and sought to show nothing of the hurt that he could not avoid feeling; while Vashon did his best to grope for the right words wherewith to approach the topic he so detested. Finesse was not in his line, he was not an adept at manœuvring, but he knew that he must probe Stephen's feelings, that the tale of Angela Seligman's treacheries must be told, or not, according to the depth of them, and that the hated part he had allotted to himself would depend upon the words he would draw from him.

Over his face there had unknowingly crept a look of loathing, his eyes, instead of a fair woman, might have been seeing something loathsome; and Printhorpe glancing casually into the mirror above the mantel shelf, stared with amazement at the reflection of Vashon. Light broke, as in a flash the look of loathing translated itself. Turning impetuously, his whole heart went out to him.

"Neil, you know her? She's the woman who lied to you. Good Lord, if I'd known, I'd have choked myself rather than have rushed into a friendship with her."

"You would have, Dolly? Say it again." And in Vashon's voice there was an intense relief at the swift speeding away of the hideous possibilities, with intrigue and craft in their trail, that a moment before had confronted him. "And you've not lost your heart to her, Dolly? It's not too late?"

"Too late!" he echoed. "What for? Lost my heart to her? I never gave a thought to such a thing." He stopped short, and coloured up. "That's not as straight as it might be. To-night, for the first

time, I found myself wondering how much I really cared for her. Just for a moment, you know, she was lying back in her chair, looking so pretty, with the child asleep on her knee."

"I'm devoutly thankful I came back," said Vashon fervently.

"If you are thankful, what must I be? You know my feelings, or rather my want of them towards women, but she," with a puzzled frown he looked at the picture, "she is different. She fascinated, vexed, offended, and attracted me almost every time I saw her; and lately somehow the sense of fascination had grown the greater. How dared she?" he added indignantly. "What possessed her to come to this house, and come to me? She must have known I was your friend, and that the house belonged to you. And now that I think of it, I remember that she always seemed to fight shy of any mention of you. Once or twice it struck me the odd way in which she turned the subject. But what did she want? What was she up to? I'm bothered if I can see the drift of it, unless I was to be the decoy-duck that would put her on your track. Ah, that's it."

"That's no use. She's too well up in some of my views for that. But why did she dress herself up in that kit, and wear the ring I gave her, and why is she surrounded with scenes of her old home?"

"Well, on that point, barring the ring, we can honestly exonerate her. She wanted the picture as a present to her old father. Why, what's the matter with that?" for Vashon laughed derisively.

"He was stone-blind twenty years ago, and for the last ten he's been shut up in an idiot asylum."

"Hang it all!" said Printhorpe, reddening angrily. "It's a bit galling to know one's been made a complete fool of. Neil, why in heaven's name didn't you tell me the moment you saw me?"

"I farked it. I was afraid I might say too much

and equally so that I might say too little. Make her a present of the picture, Dolly, she'll accept it right enough, and it will wipe off the debt you owe to a nicety. There is no reason you should see her again. I, however, mean to do so. I shall ask her fair and square what she's up to. And, if necessary," he added, "there is a little story that I shall tell her."

There was no need to tell Stephen the tale of the far away mountain tragedy. Angela Seligman was a woman. There lay her security. With a sense of unutterable relief he drove away all thoughts of the miserable part he had been prepared to enact for his friend's salvation.

"Neil," said Printhorpe^{*} presently, "I now understand why you jumped on me about my other picture. You hit me pretty hard when you said I'd forgotten. Forgotten—that's the very last thing I've done. But you were right when you said my search would be a useless absurdity. I'm more than willing to get out of town for a bit, I'm sick of it, and I'm ready to go anywhere you will. With all my heart; I wish I'd gone when you first persuaded me."

"Good old fellow! Well, if you don't mind a brief burial in the depths of the country, I'll get you to run down to Shropshire with me. I must give Margaret an account of my stewardship, and after that, well we've got the world before us, and, Dolly, at this very moment it seems to be a more satisfactory place than I could ever have believed possible. Perhaps, after all, the paralysis has not altogether numbed me, for I'm still capable of realising the intense relief from a spell of horrible tension."

CHAPTER XI

FEVERISH FANCIES, AND UGLY REALITIES

DOTTIE drew nearer to the dressing-table, before which her mother was sitting while the hair-dresser powdered her hair, that he had curled and rolled according to the mode of the French king's Court, for the fancy ball that was to take place that night. By dint of floods of tears and vows of strict silence, Dottie had been admitted into her mother's bed-room.

"Mummie," she ventured, scarcely above a whisper.

"Hush, hush."

Putting out two fat little fingers she poked them into the holes of the lace that edged the toilette cover, and again said "Mummie."

"What is it, child. You're worse than a mosquito."

"Did the king Louis' ladies always have handfuls of flour put on their heads? The man won't bake you, will he?"

She looked with alarm at the hair-dresser, but at a sign from the maid she ran back to her chair and clambered into it quickly—for a while it amused her to rub her tiny shoes together and she laughed at the little squeaking friction.

"Don't make that noise with your feet, Dottie. The next time—" but the mother's threat broke off, for the man had finished her hair and the maid was ready to dress her.

The toilette took much time. When it was finished she gazed in the long mirror with utmost interest, and the longer she looked the more she liked it. The

ground work of her dress was cream brocade; this was covered with bunches of *La France* roses, linked together by a pale Chartreuse ribbon that wound itself in a true lover's knot around them. From her shoulders there fell a train of exquisite turquoise velvet, lined with the delicate shade of the winding ribbon, and trimmed with many yards of priceless Point d'Alençon. A very few years ago this lace had been the precious property of a sweet silver-haired old lady; it had come down to her through many a generation, and she valued it only next to the son who had sowed wild oats with such success that the mother had been forced to let it follow the rest of her possessions, all of which had gone to appease the voracious appetite of the Seligman son and father, who had then presented it to the son's bride. The lace had never looked more lovely than it did now, and Angela had never felt more thoroughly pleased with her appearance.

The most important point, what jewels she should wear, had yet to be decided. She sat down again, and her maid spread tray after tray of flashing gems upon the table. Dottie's eyes got big as she looked at them, and she shuffled her chair a shade nearer. Angela held a circle of emeralds against her neck, then laid them aside for further contemplation. Rubies were quickly discarded; they clashed with the blush of the roses. Sapphires she flouted, at night they were not unlike black sealing wax. Her contemplation was for a moment checked, as Dottie fell off her chair and earned her own dismissal. Soon the piteous wail for pardon that ascended the staircase trailed away in a thin little pipe as it reached the nursery.

Angela caressed a long rope of pearls, and let it slip slowly through her fingers, then twice twisting it round her neck it fell in a festoon to her waist. Next she circled her throat with a diamond collar, and these two points being decided upon the next was easy enough, and she proceeded to bedizen herself with endless

diamond devices. This done, she went into her boudoir.

She was dining with friends before going to the ball, and had had herself dressed unnecessarily early partly because the hair-dresser was overpowered with other engagements, and partly because she had invited Printheorpe to see the perfection of her fancy dress. It was now half-past six; he would be with her in a moment. An occasional lengthy and diplomatic visit to her mother-in-law being a necessity, she had been out of town since morning, and she wondered how he had got through the day without her. Last night had shown her that she had tightened her hold upon him. The reason he had left with the other guests was obvious; of course he had gone away to think over the wonderful new thoughts that had come to him. Love, like measles, showed varied symptoms.

Hearing a step on the stairs, the thought came to her that it would be more effective not to let Stephen Printheorpe think she was waiting for him, but to keep him on tension waiting for her, and she hurried back to her bed-room. Next moment she stretched out her hand for the card her maid held towards her; the woman explaining that the gentleman who gave it had called before that day, and had been told that she would be out till late. The woman wondered at the strange uneven tone of the voice and the hesitating lips with which her mistress gave orders that he was to be shown into the boudoir, and that on no account was any one else to be admitted.

Despite the crowd of hopes and imaginations that hustled into her brain and ran helter-skelter round it, Angela's thoughts were mostly fixed upon her appearance. A friend had said of her, that were she ever to be doomed to death, she would not forget to make a good effect for the benefit of the hangman. And now the reflection that had filled her with such pride and satisfaction positively filled her with disgust. "What a mountebank I look!" she half sobbed and was seized

with a wild idea that she would tear down her high coiled hair, dash away the powder that lay light and white as hoar-frost upon it, and coil it simply round her head, drag off the costly dress, the pearl ropes and diamonds, and array herself in every-day attire. But this, at best, would take much time, and the powder and paint would besmear her hair and face, and play havoc with her complexion. The idea being an impossibility, she flung it aside, and despised her looks as much as a moment before she had loved them.

Feverishly she smoothed out the card she had crumpled in her hand and stared at Neil Vashon's name upon it. Her hands had grown strangely cold, she rubbed them together. Hurriedly pouring some eau de Cologne into a tumbler, she added a small portion of water and drank it down. The burning scented fluid filled her with fresh courage, dancing hopes outweighed her misgivings, and suggested tremendous possibilities. Had the picture done its work? Had the sight of it crept into his heart, and laid low its stronghold? Had the discovery that his friend's hands were outstretched and eager to gather in the love he had discarded made him mad to claim it? In an excited fever of fancies and tangled fantastic hopes she hurried to the boudoir.

Standing stiffly in the centre of the room Neil Vashon's eyes had scarcely left the citron velvet curtain that fell across the doorway. He had an ugly task before him; he longed to get through with it, and it seemed an interminable time before the curtain quivered, then rocked and swayed as a jewelled white hand pushed it aside. Involuntarily he stepped back before the surprising spectacle that confronted him, the exquisite lady of the French king's Court. Recovering himself quickly, he bowed courteously, thanked her for granting him the interview, and apologized for calling upon her at an untoward hour.

•Cutting short his speech Angela cried excitedly :

"Neil, you're here! that's all I care about. Had I had a glimmer that there was a chance of your coming I'd never have dressed up in this fashion," she gave the turquoise train an impatient twitch, "I'm going to a silly fancy dress ball, unless," the gladness in her eyes grew dim, and a feeling of chill crept over her, for the sight of his unimpassionate face sowed seeds of dark disappointment.

"Mrs. Seligman, what is it you want?" said Vashon sternly. Her little gasp of dismay smote him. "I beg your pardon," he added more gently. "It's a blunt way of speaking, but I'm not an adept at graceful speeches, and such as it is, it explains my reason for coming."

"I don't understand you," said Angela, with nervous, eager effort. Then, growing bolder, "Might I not put the same question to you?"

Neil bent his head in haughty acknowledgement.

"Most certainly, you have every right and reason to put it, and most willingly I answer it. I have come here because I wanted to know why you selected my friend as the man who was to paint your picture. There are many artists who equal, even excel him. I want to know why you saw fit to come to my house, knowing it was mine. This is not a very courteous or hospitable speech, but I have strong reasons for making it and—"

"I never knew it was yours. I never for a moment identified you as being Stephen Printhorpe's friend," broke in Angela hotly.

A thin, contemptuous smile lifted the corners of Vashon's lips, and told her that he had taken her lie for what it was worth.

With dry, even voice, and stern cold eyes, he went on again.

"Your object in being painted in the dress that you affected in your girlhood, surrounded with scenes that were, as you knew, familiar to me, and in wearing upon

your finger a worthless little ring that I had once given you, is known only to yourself, and inconceivable as it is, it is of no moment to me, but I repeat my former question—why did you decide to make use of my house, and why did you single out my friend?"

"Neil, why ask such futile questions?" she faltered, with sinking heart and shaking voice. "You've no right to ask them," she added querulously.

"Pardon me, but I feel I have every right, and it is for you to answer them. Mrs. Seligman, after the conversation that, not many weeks ago, you forced upon me, it is impossible for me to believe that you would have troubled yourself any further in my behalf; therefore I can only think your object has been to enslave Stephen Printhorpe. And, as any continued effort on your part, will be an annoyance to him, also to myself, I have come not only to ask the questions which evidently you cannot bring yourself to answer, but also to ask you to wipe him away from the list of your whims."

For the space of a second Angela stared at him defiantly.

"Are you your brother's keeper? The man is a coward, how dare he send you to insult me? And you, how dare you do it?" she hissed at him, fast losing all traces of self-control.

"If need be I dare a good deal, Mrs. Seligman, even this," answered Vashon, with his cold eyes fixed upon her. "I am acting on my own initiative entirely. The term coward is singularly inappropriate to my friend. A man would not dare to call him that twice. Women are securely sheltered, and some take advantage of that shelter. What I have to say, is between you and me. I speak to you with a full knowledge of the past. On that past I take my stand. You will hardly care to challenge me on that ground."

"How generous of you to tell him tales of me," she swept him a mocking curtsy, "so manly, so noble."

Another curtsey more profound yet, then, as her hot eyes travelled furiously over his stately bearing, his colossal height, and look of splendid strength, never more marked than now, the absurdity of her sneers struck her, she broke into a short hysterical laugh.

With calm, even voice Vashon answered her.

"In self-vindication I must tell you that I never betrayed your name, although, if necessary, I was fully prepared to do so. Printhorpe knew that many years ago a woman had broken faith with me within a week of the day when she was to have married me, but he only identified her with you when he saw the look of aversion that came over my face as I stood before your picture."

Passion for an instant held her speechless. Here he had given her the sharpest sting of all. The knowledge that the picture she had set such store by had helped her undoing; that her beauty had been looked at with aversion, almost maddened her. The cards had failed her, she had drawn the deuce from the centre of the pack. Hope, shrivelled and dead, had mocked her before it died. Panting with passion, she darted before him and intercepted his attempt to end the interview by leaving the room. With her gorgeous train spreading itself in exquisite folds around her, with her flashing jewels and flaming eyes, she looked like some exquisite foreign bird with shivering Paradise plumes. Neil Vashon recoiled before the amazing effect of her, and the thought of the part he had elected to play rather than see Printhorpe her victim filled him with horror.

Her voice shrilled, clutching the pearl rope in her hands she sawed and fretted it round her throat.

"And what if I don't please to wipe Stephen Printhorpe off my list of whims? Are you stronger than I, and can man's friendship for you defy a woman's will?"

"In this case most certainly it can and it will; on this I would stake my oath, and were it not so I would

leave undone nothing that I could do to prevent him from wasting a grain of faith upon you. And I can conceive no greater curse for any man than that he should put his trust in you and let his fate fall into your keeping."

In a blind insensate fury she struck at him, grazing his cheek with the sharp point of a marquise ring.

As in a vice he seized her delicate wrist. Scarcely understanding his grip upon it he held it from him, and with a passion in his voice more subdued yet deeper and more convincing than her own, he spoke to her :

"Before I have finished you will perhaps understand why I would spare no effort to save my friend from you. I am deeply thankful, thankful beyond words, there is no necessity for those efforts; and I want you to realise clearly that the part you once acted towards me has done little or nothing to influence me against you, in comparision with the part you played to another. Mine is an old story, his was a newer one, and its ending more tragic, and as I think of it I feel that this hand of yours has no right to be so delicately white; it should be red with the stain of blood—a man's blood."

"Ah, I don't understand you," whimpered Angela weakly. The fury had lashed itself away, giving place to a great terror.

"I'll soon make my meaning clear, Mrs. Seligman," said Vashon almost cruelly. "It was a strange coincidence that two of your victims should have come together in the wilds of the Rocky mountains, so strange that people might scoff at its impossibility; but the things of this world beggar the creations of fiction. I was one of the victims, a man called Fleetwood was the other. I had ceased to care, his misery weighed heavy upon him. He shot himself, and his poor ravings explained that it was his way of escape from a life that you had made impossible. God! the mountains rang with the miserable story. I buried

him with your face upon his breast." He flung the small white hand away from him. "Bah! it should be red, it has no right to be white!"

Angela Seligman's lips moved and gave out no audible sound; she moistened them, and bit them sharply between her teeth. With one hand she clutched, to steady herself, a fold of the citron curtain, for the whole world seemed to be reeling; the other she lifted heavily as though it were lead, stared at it with a wild, strange light in her eyes, and hoarsely whispered "red." The air grew dark around her, and, silhouetted against a background black as night, she saw the face and form of the man who had thrown away the life she had made worthless. His face was ashen coloured, and the blood froth foamed on his lips. The darkness lifted and she surveyed miserably the surroundings of her dainty boudoir, its pale and deeper yellow shadings, that he had blended together for her pleasure, squandering his scanty income upon the baubles, hangings and draperies that made it beautiful. A speck of the dread red stain seemed to burn upon the flashing marquise ring he had given her, the ring that had wounded Vashon. With nerveless, fumbling movement she wiped its surface against the turquoise velvet, looking at it she fancied the speck of red burnt brighter, spreading its blood coloured rays outward on every side.

Then her eyes came back to Vashon, who with closely compressed lips and cold un pitying eyes, watched the door with ill-concealed impatience. He was wearied of the sickening interview, and the passion he had flogged into his heart had died down, leaving it colder and more intolerant of the woman who had winced and grown fearful at his words. The silence remained unbroken, he stretched out his hand to open the door, the curtain of which she still clung to.

Then some power gave back her speech to Angela Seligman. A torrent of smothered, sobbing, love-words

fell heavily from her lips, and seizing his hand in hers, she bent her head with its crown of silvered curls; pressing her hot lips upon it, she covered it with kisses, and would have knelt to him. With an unspeakable horror in his heart he prevented her, and supporting her with one hand, with which he not ungently grasped her arm, he pressed her back against the curtain that draped the doorway.

"Angela," he cried hoarsely, "for God's sake remember you are a woman. Angela, are you mad?"

For a moment they remained so, their gaze glued to one another; then again her head bent forward, and heavy hopeless tears rolled unheeded down her cheeks, leaving in their track ugly ravages upon the paint and powder that bedaubed them. Standing there before him with bent head, and hands clasping and unclasping in a nervous grip that betrayed her agitation, Angela broke through the crust of habitual deception, and for once laid her soul bare before him.

"Neil, I plotted and planned to get you back again, you, and you only. I had the picture painted in the hope that the sight of it might soften your heart towards me, and I lied to Stephen Printhorpe till I induced him to paint it. I worked hard to attract him, solely that through him I might gain you, thinking that you might feel the sting of jealousy if he should learn to care for me, and then I knew the rest would come easy enough, and that you would come back to me."

Her voice died away in a whisper, and Vashon's white face flushed crimson. The thought that this woman could conceive such a base and futile plot in the vain hope of reviving a love that had long since smouldered away and left no spark of life, hurt him horribly. No vain glimmer of elation at her desire to draw him back to her found place for one instant within him, only a deep distress that she should have sunk to such a depth. He could scarcely bring himself

to look at her, and he burnt with the deep sense of humiliation that he felt on her behalf. Intent upon their own thoughts neither of them heard the sound of tiny naked feet that pattered as raindrops kissing leaves; and neither of them saw the little child who, creeping cautiously through the other door that opened from her mother's bedroom, now started amazed at such an unexpected sight.

Dottie, taking her tears of disappointment into bed with her, had sobbed herself into a fitful sleep, till a heavy sob, deeper than the rest, had roused her, and she had sat up in bed and looked fearfully round her, called her nurse and received no answer, for the woman was enjoying high life below stairs. Shadows had flickered across the room dancing fandangoes over the walls, and one had looked painfully like Dottie's conception of the Bogie-man. In an agony she had slipped out of bed, and pattering into the passage she had peeped down the stairs. The flooding electric lights gave her comfort, and a happy thought came to her. She would make her way downstairs, and see for herself which jewels her Mummie had decided on; she might not be too late to see her, and most likely the new friend who painted pictures would be with her, and he would screen her from all scolding. But Dottie's eyes revolved like wheels as they took in the new man who looked so strangely and gravely at her mother, who was now crying and speaking all together, and when she wrung her hands with a gesture of despair, Dottie who could bear no more, flew from her hiding place to her.

"Mummie, you's crying." She turned impetuously to Vashon. "Why do you make my Mummie cry? Did you hurt her?"

Quickly putting her hand over her child's lips, Angela checked her speech.

"Dottie, it was I who hurt him, cruelly once. Ah, and to-day I struck him."

"Did you?" said the child with wide surprise; it

was all very inexplicable, but very interesting. Turning to Vashon, she uplifted her tiny arms towards him. "Pick me up," she cried in small arbitrary voice, and bending low Vashon obeyed her and held in his arms the lovely mite. She stroked her soft fingers over the bruise that had grown more vivid on his cheek with a tender caressing touch.

"You're sorry, isn't you, Mummie?" but only the sound of smothered weeping answered her.

"Angela," said Vashon very gently, it was now his turn to plead with her. "For the sake of this child forgive and forget all that has now gone by between us. And though our paths in life must wind in different ways, let us do the best we can with the life that is left us."

With streaming eyes she looked up at him.

"Neil, if ever we meet again, will you speak to me?"

"Willingly."

"Neil, kiss the child, kiss Dottie."

He put his hand against the little flaxen head, drew it down to him, and kissed the sweet child-lips, the first his own had touched since the days when they had loved to linger on her mother's. Then putting the little creature down upon her feet, he left the room.

At ten o'clock that night a crimson carpet was stretched from the doorway of the pretty house in Park Street and reached across the pavement. The passers-by loitered to see what was to be seen, and were amply rewarded by the sight of a beautiful woman, painted and powdered to perfection, who stepped from the carpet to her carriage.

"Ain't she just a hangel?" exclaimed a weary dilapidated seller of ripe oranges, as she hitched her heavy basket higher on her arm.

Her companion was a bit of a philosopher.

"Hangel indeed! It's easy enough for them as has full insides and nothink to worrit them to be hangels. Give her a man as kick's 'er 'ead, when she don't bring

'im 'ome nothink to get drunk on. Give her children as dies because there ain't enough food to keep 'em alive, and see where your blooming hangel would get to then. Blowed if she'd be any better nor you and me."

The two women moved away at the bidding of the policeman.

CHAPTER XII

THE RAPTURE OF REALISATION

SPRING sulked. The Shropshire hills and dales frowned heavily. Mother Nature had wrapped this patch in her kingdom in sombre-toned packing paper, and had left it sad-coloured and dreary, while she drew lavishly from her treasure-house rich colourings and laid them on other lands; and the country-side, as though jealous of her neglect, gave her a chill and sullen reception when she came back to it. Swollen rivers rolled turbulently through their drab and dingy beds. Steel-grey skies were a replica of the gloom and listlessness below, leaves kept on their rust-coloured coats, and the winds that swept through the naked branches of the tree-tops moaned a mournful disapproval of her. So she set herself to coax, rather than scold, the rebellious little speck. She bade soft showers come down and cry upon it, and let their tears trickle through the hard stern soil; she called upon the sun to break through the cold sky and look down on it and sprawl its great hot fingers all over it; to let its searching eyes peer long and lovingly into the crannies and corners of it; and she proved so irresistible that the country-side roused itself, burst out of its packing paper, and spring, like a lovely lady late with her toilette, hurried into her fine new dress.

It was such a beautiful dress, no mortal skill could conceive it. No gold could procure it, and mother

nature alone could weave it and fit it upon her child. Innumerable dormant things grew wide awake, and struggled into life vigorous with sap. The leaves flung away their coats, and the trees, all save the copper beeches, who fancied themselves in russet-red, put on green of every conceivable shading from sap to sage. Orchards burst into blossom and prinked themselves in rose colour opening into pink and white. Delicate spring flowers, as lovely and sweet, if less brilliant than their summer sisters, studded the hedges, and when the tillers of the soil ploughed up some acres of rich brown earth, that made a happy contrast to the iridescent turnip-fields that intersected them, the mighty patch-work laid upon the land was perfect, nothing was lacking that could possibly add to its beauty.

Rivers, whose smiling faces reflected the sunshine above, made their way pleasantly and languidly past banks, now lush-green, golden and studded with small amazing flowers, looking as though they had never shown traces of temper. And at the first hint of daylight the sweet unwritten love-songs thrilled through the scented air from countless feathered throats, until the thickets at dusk-fall made the birds too drowsy to go on with their singing.

Passing through this perfect world of spring-time Stephen Printhorpe gave a laugh of great content. The chestnut mare, who had also lost her winter coat, and whose new spring coat gleamed in the sunshine, was speeding him and Neil Vashon along the road that lay between Wybourne Court and the station.

"Glad you've come?" asked Vashon, looking down at him.

"Glad!" he echoed. "Why, just look at it!" He gave a wide sweep of his hand. "Besides, after a succession of weeks in London, who wouldn't be more than ready to get away from it; wonder was there ever a man that wasn't."

"I met a fellow at the club the other day who said

he loathed the country because it was so silent at night that it kept him awake. Anyhow, the exchange is a good one for you, and you'll get back to work all the better for it."

"I don't know about that. I think my working days are over; my last achievements have put me dead off anything further."

Vashon flicked the whip at him, gave him a friendly pat on the back and laughed at him.

"Dolly, don't talk rot."

"Well, you can't say their result has been a happy one! But, of course, that's no one's fault but my own. I suppose I deserved all I got for painting an angel and bedaubing her black as a fiend, and for painting a fiend—sorry, old man—I mean a woman, and giving her the eyes of an angel."

An unintelligible exclamation from Vashon had caused him to correct his speech, and he fell anew to wondering why his fierce indignation towards the woman who had plotted to deceive them had died down. He had heard little or nothing with regard to the interview that he knew had taken place between them, and Printhorpe's inborn tact told him never to attempt to draw away the cloak of reserve in which Vashon occasionally wrapped himself up.

"At all events," Printhorpe continued, "for the next few weeks I intend to be very busy doing nothing; it's an excellent game provided it's very seldom played."

"Poor Margaret won't prevent you," rejoined Vashon. "Stephen, be your very nicest to her, even if you do find her a bit dismal and heavy on hand; poor soul, she's had a precious bad time of it."

"I wonder why it is that some people get all the chickens' legs in life, or suffer actual starvation, and endure the tortures of Tantalus; while others who have done nothing to deserve them, are helped to the wings and all the nicest, choicest pieces, and are

plentifully supplied with all the very best that life can give them."

"If we go on driving till we have solved that problem, we shall sit in this cart for the rest of our lives, and you, Molly, old girl, will have dropped down dead before we have caught a glimmer of its solution," answered Vashon, and the mare who knew her name, sprang into her collar. "Ah, there's Margaret," he added, for Molly was circling the gravel sweep that spread before the house, and Lady Margaret Craven, who had been standing in the porch, came forward to greet them. "Margaret, here we are, and I've brought you Printhorpe."

She turned to him with welcoming courtesy.

"The day," she said, "is as pleased to see you both as I am."

"You couldn't say anything prettier than that, Margaret," answered Vashon, drawing her hand through his arm and giving it a friendly little pat; "and if you're half as pleased as the day is perfect we needn't grovel in Bradshaw for the next train back again. Yes, you certainly brought out your best weather for us," he stood very still, took off his hat and let the soft west wind lightly lift the iron grey hair that waved thickly on his forehead, "and I in exchange have brought you the very best thing I have got, and that is Stephen." He looked at Printhorpe with a pleased, proud proprietorship.

"I know Neil," laughed Stephen to his hostess, "he's paving his way towards borrowing sixpence from me and hopes to discount refusal by flattery. Forewarned, forearmed. I'm proof against his seductions."

Looking, as he spoke, at Margaret Craven, he could not avoid the thought that nature had shown her very little kindness in denying her all traces of the gift of beauty; and she, scanning his lithe and well-knit figure and charming face, could not but think that she had

never seen a man so undeniably good to look upon. For a moment she stood between them, and intimately as she and Neil were acquainted with each detail of the scene spread before them, it now seemed to stand out with a fresh vividness and beauty that compelled their attention. All three of them let their eyes travel far beyond the old-time Elizabethan garden with its prim yew hedges and trim borders, planted with dear old-fashioned flowers, beyond the homely fields made white and yellow with myriads of moon-daisies, and the higher lands seamed and slashed with wooded valleys, till they reached the crests of the Malvern Hills, now splendid in the red-gold light that the sun splashed down upon them.

"Doesn't it make you feel you want to paint it?" asked Margaret Craven of Printhorpe, whose eyes were fastened upon the distant hills that looked as though they would fain stretch away to a world of beaten gold flecked with a rose-red radiance.

"I wouldn't dare attempt it; perhaps if I spread silver and gold and crimson over a ground-work of pearl, and then lit a thousand lamps behind it, I might catch some of those lights, but not otherwise."

"Margaret," interrupted Vashon, "don't let him loose upon the subject of painting; poor old fellow, he's a bit," he tapped his forehead significantly, "a bit balmy, don't you know." Crossing over to Printhorpe, he flung his arm lightly over his shoulder and looked into his eyes. "Angry, are you, Dolly?"

"Not I! that's where you hold and bully me. You know I couldn't get angry with you if I tried. That's just where a fresh proof of his cunning comes in, Lady Margaret," laughed Printhorpe.

Vashon's retort, whatever it might have been, came to nothing, checked by the sudden sound of a voice that poured forth from the open window of the music-room. A voice so full of power, so clear, and of such delicate inflection, that in a maze of admiration, all

tangled with amazement, the two men listened to the words that reached them :

"My heart is like a singing bird,
Whose nest is in a watered shoot ;
My heart is like an apple-tree,
Whose boughs are bent with thick-set fruit ;
My heart is like a rainbow shell
That paddles in a halcyon sea ;
My heart is gladder than all these,
Because my love is come to me."

"It's Roma singing," explained Margaret, noting the arrested look upon their faces.

"Roma!" echoed Vashon, "who on earth is Roma?"

"Dear Neil, I told you about her coming before you went to Canada. It's Roma Vella, can't you remember my telling you of the girl whose father asked me to look after her, and I wrote to you as soon as I had seen her, but of course my letter missed you as you came back so much sooner than you had expected."

"Ah, I do remember your telling me something about her. But what a voice! Margaret, you're in luck to have discovered it."

"Raise me a dais of silk and down,
Hang it with vair and purple dyes ;
Carve it with doves and pomegranates
And peacocks with a hundred eyes ;
Work it in gold and silver grapes,
In leaves and silver fleur-de-lys ;
Because the birthday of my life
Is come, my love is come to me."

"Her voice is beautiful, but the song is an absurdity." There was a faint, almost imperceptible shade of impatience in her tone. "Come in and have some tea; you will think me strangely remiss."

The apology was meant for Printhorpe, but with a cousin's familiarity Vashon answered it.

"Not a bit, I'd have asked for it if I'd thought

of it, and the sunset will have satisfied Stephen's cravings."

Tea was waiting them in the inner hall, through which the sweet voice rippled with a wonderful gladness :

"Because the birthday of my life
Is come, my love is come—"

The song ceased suddenly. Lady Margaret's summons had reached the singer.

"What a pity to spoil the birthday," smiled Vashon ; then he looked up as the flash of a white dress skimmed past the balustrade that railed the corridor above them, and was lost in the curve of the staircase. Soon a tall slim girl ran swiftly into sight, then paused for a moment at the sight of the strangers below. A shaft of the westering sunlight slanting through the window above her, played softly upon her, as though glad to greet a playmate. Veins of gold threaded through her russet hair, shone and scintillated beneath its touch, circling like a nimbus round her exquisite little face, soft with the velvet softness that is given out at the rising of life's curtain and taken back again long before it falls.

With a wide surprise Vashon's eyes dwelt upon her.

"Why, Margaret, the birthday child is beautiful," he said in an undertone.

With a perplexed confusion and with breath coming quickly, Printhorpe's eyes never moved from her. His present surroundings vanished, as though some unseen power had lifted him away from them. A storm-tossed night raved around him, a dark river lapped angrily beside him, and before him was the face of the woman that had haunted him, not tired and affrighted, as last he had seen it, but smiling, and as perfect as in dreams it had come to him. With a heart that almost ceased to beat, he watched for her to disappear suddenly as she had come, and leave him starving for another sight of

her. For a moment his brain whirled and the present was lost sight of in the rapture of the realised vision. His soul called upon her to stay with him, almost he cried aloud, but with a great effort he restrained himself, and by degrees he regained some self-possession and a recollection of present surroundings.

With a childlike simplicity Roma Vella put out her hand to Neil Vashon, and looked at him with the frank unembarrassed interest that she would have felt towards any stranger who had crossed her path. An unknown flower, a shell, a bird, or any other thing hitherto unseen would have won the same look from her.

Then, withdrawing her hand, she turned to Stephen Printhorpe, who was still battling with the sense of unreality, too violently shaken to trust himself to meet her eyes, and thus did not see the fear that leapt into hers at the sight of him, nor the cloud that momentarily rested upon her sunny face. The vague shadow of an evil dream was upon her. She herself did not understand it, but she shivered in sudden cold and gloom. She roused herself with an effort, and with a curious sense of relief crossed over to the neighbourhood of Neil Vashon.

Like one in a trance Printhorpe heard himself speak, and his voice, as he answered Margaret Craven, sounded husky and uneven in his own hearing. His temples throbbed and a fever-heat ran fast through his blood. He longed to be alone with Vashon, that he might tell him of this wonderful thing that had come to him, but he longed far more that he might be allowed to sit in speechless silence, and steep his soul in a new vision of beauty.

Again and again Roma Vella's eyes flashed a vain searching glance at him, as though drawn by something that fascinated, yet repelled her. Then gathering up some knitting that lay scattered upon the table, she sat down near Vashon, and spoke a little apology to her cousin.

"Cousin Margaret, I'm so sorry I left it lying about, but it worried me so that I threw it down there and then forgot it." She laid her knitting upon her knee, flattened her little hand upon it, then picking up the distorted sock she shook her head at its shapelessness. "It's all wrong; I wish old Jimmy the bell-ringer had no heels," she said to Vashon, with a soft laugh and a yet softer southern accent.

"As he's nearly deaf and almost blind, you needn't grudge him a heel or two," he answered with a mock reproach.

Roma's colour flew to her face, and leaning forward again the sunlight caught her hair and set its gold threads all aglow.

"I don't, I don't indeed. I'd wish him ten heels if I thought they'd make him happy, and if I hadn't promised to knit socks for them." Drawing out the needles, she unravelled the knitting, and rolled the wool into a lumpy ball. "I do this most days," she added, with a small sigh.

"Like the lady who warded off her lovers by undoing her work."

"I'm like Penelope, you mean?"

The name floated over to Printhorpe, and he remembered the last time he had heard it, and he frowned impatiently at the thought of the woman it had then been applied to. He dared not try to catch their conversation, nor turn his difficult attention away from his hostess lest he should never regain it.

Roma went on lightly with her protest.

"I'm not one bit like Penelope. She never meant to finish her work, and some day I shall certainly finish mine. Besides, she belonged to Ulysses, and it would have grieved him if she had finished hers, but I belong to no one. So you see, I'm not the very least like Penelope."

"Then what about the song you were singing when we disturbed you?" he asked her with amusement in

his eyes. She seemed to him as a beautiful child to be teased, trifled with and pleased.

"I was singing of some one else, not of myself," retorted Roma, with a rippling laughter. "But all the time I was singing I was thinking how glad she was that her love had come to her, and it made me feel quite glad myself that anyone should be so happy. I don't think she seemed to have cared about any of the beautiful things till she knew that he had come, the gold and silver grapes, the purple dyes, the pomegranates and fleur-de-lys, but when he came she wanted everything that was beautiful and best."

Margaret Craven broke in suddenly, coldly:

"Roma what nonsense you are talking, you are wound up child."

"It's the wool that is wound up," answered Vashon irrelevantly, and he stooped to pick up the ball of wool that had slipped from Roma's knee. He felt an unreasonable shade of annoyance against his cousin. It seemed so unnecessary to snub the child and call up the sensitive colour that tinted her face as she stood up and looked quickly towards the door.

"Are you going out again?" said Margaret more gently.

"I'd like to go, Cousin Margaret," she moved away quickly.

"Take me with you," said Vashon; and without waiting for an answer he followed her.

And the west wind gathered up all the sweetest spring scents and flew forward through the mellow light to meet them, as together they walked in the peace that hung over the close of a perfect day.

CHAPTER XIII

RAYS OF LIGHT IN TIRED EYES

It was with a curious sense of relief that Stephen Prin-
thorpe watched Vashon and his companion cross the hall
and pass beyond the range of his sight. She had not
cast a glance at him, although her dress had brushed
him in passing. He breathed yet more freely when a
message requiring Margaret's attention relieved him of
her kindly consideration. Left alone, his eyes turned
to the window, and his thoughts to the girl who for a
moment had paused beside it, the light wreathing a
golden circlet around her. With that ideal face before
him, so real, so tangible, so definite, he found it
difficult to recall the angel of his picture in its feeble
incompleteness, that elusive dream-face that escaped
him whenever he tried to depict it on his canvas. He
had searched for it so long, so patiently, and at last so
hopelessly; it had come to him here and now when he
had abandoned the search in despair. All the aspira-
tions of the artist awoke in him again; it was not fame
that beckoned him now; not the applause of men that
he coveted any longer; only to paint her as he knew he
could paint her, as he had never painted yet. The
attainment of his life's longing lay within his grasp.
The fates had led him to her very feet.

Then he drew from his pocket the small silver coin
that he had so carefully guarded, and as he looked at it
he remembered that there were several links missing in
the chain of events that connected this beautiful,
radiant girl, surrounded with every luxury and wealth,

with a poor street-singer, who on a bitter winter night had strayed into the haunts which evil birds frequent, and who had accepted the charity he offered her. Not a shadow of doubt crossed his mind that he and Roma Vella had met face to face before under circumstances entirely amazing and extraordinary. He scarce gave a thought to the possibility of her having recognised him; mercifully for her there was not the smallest chance of such a thing, and, poor little soul, her secret whatever it might be was safe with him and Neil as with herself. Entirely wrapped in the thought that the gods had given him his desire, he experienced not the smallest wish to peer into her past, not yet to concern himself with her future. He cared only that he had found her, that she should satisfy his ambition and crown his work with perfection.

"I wonder," thought Printhorpe, "why they call her Roma." Again he scrutinised the other name, Lucia, that was cut upon the coin. "They are both soft-sounding and foreign, but I think I prefer Roma." His lips lingered on the name and again he repeated it.

Footsteps disturbed the silence, and he moved to meet Margaret Craven.

"Would you care to take a turn round the picture-gallery? But the light," she said, looking about her, "will not show up the pictures well. Or shall we join Neil and my cousin?" She stepped towards the door. Seeing that he hesitated, "Ah, you prefer the pictures?"

The picture-gallery at Wybourne Court was known far beyond the limits of the county. Printhorpe assented almost unwillingly to Margaret Craven's proposal to visit it. He fancied that he was not in the mood even for pictures, but the glories of that long gallery, hung with some of the choicest specimens of every school and almost every age of painting, roused him at once to the deepest interest and the highest pitch of enthusiasm. All too soon the light failed, and the evening shadows made further inspection impossible.

They paused by the great window with its cushioned recess, and looked back upon the whole length of the gallery.

With a voice full of enthusiasm Printhorpe turned to Margaret Craven.

"Neil told me something of your wonderful picture-gallery, but I little realised the number of its treasures. I shall be very impatient till to-morrow's light lets me thoroughly enjoy them."

"It's a real pleasure to me when anyone appreciates them;" her tone had a reflection of his own. "I have lived so much alone that I look upon them as my friends, my quiet but always comforting companions. These old Masters have taught me many a truth in art and also in life."

"It makes one feel very humble," said Printhorpe, with a sigh. "Humble when one remembers one's own achievements, yet proud to be following ever so far off in their footsteps. This age is stamped with mediocrity."

"How is this to be accounted for? Why are the men and women of this generation less gifted than their great fore-runners? Are talents begrudged them from their birth?"

"Not begrudged; on the contrary they are too lavishly dispersed. Talent enough, but the spark of genius is denied. The gifts that in other days endowed a solitary individual seem now to be split piecemeal among many. This, I think, applies equally to authors, poets, sculptors and musicians, to all forms of art. Where one of these was wont to shine as a light that lit the whole world, there are now a multitude of lesser lights, that having twinkled a while are suddenly extinguished, and the world is scarcely a shade the darker for the loss of their little lustre. For another thing, I fancy, the rush and fever-heat, the eternal hurry of life in this present age, has much to say to the jeopardy in which art now stands. The fear of

being left behind, of being jostled aside by the superior speed of others, drives hard, and in our hurry and folly we attempt to do in months that to which the old Masters would have dedicated years. When I think of these things, I wonder their spirits don't rise up and scoff and mock at our conceit and our ineffectiveness."

With his face very earnest and his blue eyes full of thought, Printhorpe had for a moment forgotten his companion, who looked at and listened to him with an evident interest. Suddenly, with a quick apology, he turned to her.

"Lady Margaret, you'll wish you had taken Neil's advice, and not let me loose on this subject."

"I shall wish no such thing," she answered warmly. "I can scarcely explain the pleasure it gives me to have some one who cares for such subjects to talk and to listen to. Dear Neil does not know a master-piece from a daub, and says so himself. I remember him once saying that he liked a picture that had plenty of colour and a big gold frame. He was a boy when he said it, but I fancy his sentiments would be much the same to-day. And I well remember how he shocked me; I was young then and it sounded almost as blasphemy when, after having carefully inspected the court-yard that stood almost intact in the centre of the ruins of Carew Castle, he remarked that, with a little repair, it would make an excellent racquet court."

"The old heathen, how like him!" laughed Printhorpe. "I know Carew Castle well, every turn and twist in it, and very beautiful it is; a perfect relic of a bygone age. Isn't it horrible to think that architecture is not a decaying, but actually a lost art? It is one that can be ill spared. It is education that has killed it. Men have now such easy modes of expressing the thoughts within them that they no longer painfully and patiently build them up in stone. The wonderful petrified lace work of Roslyn Chapel would be impossible to the workers of to-day, who do not love the labour of their

hands as those old workers did, who carved as carefully, as elaborately in the remotest, darkest corner as in the most prominent places. They wrought to the glory of God and as humble servants of art. But nowadays the world flies on so fast that there is no time for sincere and patient toiling. Men scamp their labour, and begrudge time and pains, and so it's very rare that any individual rises to the high-water mark of genius and stamps his mind upon his generation."

With a sudden unwonted impulse Margaret answered him.

"I think, whatever the work you may see fit to undertake, that it will stand out as a thing apart that will not be engulfed in the flood of mediocrity, and that some day all who have known you will be glad and proud for you."

The words which had sprung from her lips set his heart afire; the fire glowed hot in his eyes, it flamed in his face, and he forgot the existence of the woman who watched him with a new light in her dull eyes that seemed to give to them some of the colour that tears had long since washed away. Few had cared to understand her on such topics, and the knowledge that her few words of appreciation had held the power to move and stir him sent a strange ray of gladness through the grey gloom that enslaved her being.

"Yes," said Printhorpe to himself, "it shall stand apart. Nothing can now interfere with its perfection."

A ring of light laughter chimed in with his mood of quiet exultation, and his heart throbbed fast in the stillness that followed it.

Turning, they looked down at the girl who walked across the lawn beneath them. Her hat, heavy-laden with wild blade and blossom, had fallen back from her face, the west wind that coloured her cheeks with its caresses frolicked with the stray tendrils of her gleaming hair. In her hand she held a ball of freshly gathered cowslips, and holding it close to her face seemed to exhale its fragrance.

Across Printhorpe there flashed a thought that he and Neil seemed to have shuffled and changed their identity. He, who loved light and laughter had stood in the shadow, and had talked grave things with a grave and wearied looking woman. Neil, who rarely threw off his mantle of reserve and encouraged grave thoughts rather than gay, was standing in the opal light of that lovely evening, looking with indulgent eyes and kindly smiles at a sweet girl face and a golden cowslip ball.

"Now see me toss it," cried Roma clearly. "It's years since I last tossed a cowslip ball. But I remember the words that I was then taught to say. See me catch it; I'll toss it high."

Flinging up the ball, she sang aloud:

"Tisty-tosty, four and forty. How many years shall I live and love life?"

Forty times the ball flew high before her fingers failed to clutch it, and she turned to Vashon a little breathless in her merriment.

"Isn't it good? I'm to live another forty years, and the years will never be sad, for all the time I shall love being alive. Now you toss it and say the words that I have said."

"No, no," he answered with a short laugh that she could not understand for it had in it no gladness. "I should never love life and so I should not care to count the years that I must live."

"Could you not learn to love it?" she asked him gravely. "I'm sure you could; but if you won't toss the ball, I shall toss it for you."

All the brightness flew back to her face.

"Tisty-tosty, four and forty. How many years will he live and love life?"

A silver-toned laugh soared after the ball, that seemed to poise for a moment in the crimson glow, then a shower of bruised and broken blossoms scattered down upon them.

"I wish I had not thrown it," said Roma slowly.

CHAPTER XIV

PLAGUE-SPOTTED PETALS

"PETER and you and I," said Roma, "will go and sit in the sunshine."

It was noontide, and Neff Vashon had been watching her flitting through the garden, gathering great bunches of gilly-flowers for the blue dragon bowls that stood in the hall. He never remembered seeing the house, hitherto so gloomy, in its stateliness, bedecked as now with flowers wherever there was possible place for them. With his hat tilted over his forehead, with his pipe sending smoke rings into the sunshine, and with Peter curled up on the seat beside him, his eyes had long followed her, and he had listened as she sang aloud quaint snatches of song.

Stuffing his pipe into his pocket and giving Peter a friendly prod, he stood up and, skirting the yew hedge behind her, he surprised her down upon her knees, earnestly occupied in flattening with her hand a foot-mark she had made upon the flower border.

"Cousin Margaret would say nothing when she saw it, but as she'd see it for certain I've patted it flat."

She brushed her earth-stained palm against the grass, sprang to her feet and said: •

"Peter and you and I, will go and sit in the sunshine."

•
"Peter will quite agree that he should rank before me, but you'll turn his head if you put him above your-

self. Where are the others?" he said with sudden thought. "It's over an hour since I set eyes on either of them."

"Cousin Margaret took Mr. Printhorpe up to the picture gallery. Of course that is the only thing that will interest him, so don't disturb him," answered Roma a little quickly, and unconsciously her feet moved faster.

"Is it though! Why there never was a man who had more interests." The topic was a pleasant one, and he launched into detail. "He's devoted to sport and is an excellent sportsman, a good shot and a patient fisherman. He rides far above the average, is keen on hunting, and grumbles because he's a bit too heavy for steeple-chasing. Oh no! Stephen has many interests, and I'm proud to say that I am one of them. You shouldn't have run away with the notion that because he's an artist he's no ideas in his head beyond pictures."

"But I didn't, for I haven't given a thought to him," answered Roma, with a little catch in her voice and a quick flush on her face; she knew well enough that she had given many a thought to the man whose presence called out in her an unaccountable feeling of unrest, that filled her with memories vague, tangible, but always disagreeable. But pleasant thoughts and pleasing fancies alone seemed fitted to this sweet spring morning; she chased away her half-formed fears, and the smiles came speeding back to her.

Her little lapse into uneasiness was lost on Vashon, though it was with no small amusement that he had heard her avowal. If she had not given a thought to Stephen, his friend could not say the same of himself, for he had raved about her till late into the night, protesting that she was the woman whose face had haunted him, the ideal he had so long been seeking. Hotly indignant when Vashon, half scoffingly but always a little indulgently, had thrown doubt upon the identity, till

growing weary he had bidden him to go to bed and wake up in a state of sanity.

"Evidently Peter has taken it upon himself to select the spot where we shall sit." She waved her hat, which she carried in her hand, towards the old dog, who had propped himself against a tree trunk that lay low beside the river bank. "I think he means it as a hint to me that I had better wash my hands."

Bending down, she dabbled them in the water, to the anguish of a moor hen who with webbed feet and wide-spread wings skimmed the stream till the sedges gave her shelter. Drawing out her hands, she lifted them into the light, and the sun flashed prisms in the drops trembling upon them.

"My fingers," she cried, "are covered with jewels, diamonds, such big beauties. Fancy if they were real ones! Oh, just think of it!"

"And would you prize them above all other things?" a curious look fell over his face.

"Above all other things?" she echoed with a wide surprise. "Of course not, how could I?"

"There have been women who have prized such things far and away above all others, and who have bartered their souls in exchange for them."

"Then they must be wicked or mad, and oh, they will be miserable." She looked unflinchingly into the keen face that watched her.

"Child," he said with a strange gravity, "bear that in mind, and promise that you will never forget what you have just said."

For a moment her eyes spoke bewilderment, then laughter hurried back to them.

"Great-grandfather, I promise."

"So you scoff at my grey hairs," said Vashon with a mock austerity. "I must see if I can't buy you a picture of the bears eating up the naughty children who derided poor old Elisha."

"Indeed, I did no such thing." A warm colour crept

from her throat to the curls on her forehead. "You called me child, just as if I were very young and you appallingly old." Seeing his look, she gave a little laugh of relief. "I assure you I'm innocent; till now I never saw the grey hairs, but unless I stood on a chair I couldn't well see the top of your head, and each time you stand up I think of Agrippa: "Now tall Agrippa was so high, so tall he almost reached the sky."

Soon the occupation of winding a garland round Peter's neck engrossed her so completely that she forgot to speak, and Vashon, beguiling moments in a scented world of changing lights, lay stretched in lazy contentment, his thoughts drifting on nothing more serious than the vagaries of the gleaming dragon-flies that shot in mid-air on their glistening way, colouring the shade, and matching the sunshine, posing upon the small star flowers that studded the stream, spangling the russet sorrel spires, and flitting through the wealth of green that sucked up the life-giving water. Lazily his eyes followed the play of a wren that popped in and out of the tangle of young blade and fresh-briar that threaded the hedge, and the antics of the bright-eyed squirrels, whisking their tails on their way to the tree tops. Scarce heeding it, he heard the song of the singing birds, whose notes in divers keys swelled the chorus of the spring-tide, and lying there in that kaleidoscope of shifting lights and shades, with melody and sweet things all around, Vashon dimly understood that this was one of the green places of life, full of pleasantness and peace, and the idle moments were well spent.

His eyes turned to the presiding genius of the place. Roma had left her seat to gather some branches of wild cherry; her face was bent over the blossoms, and as he looked up at her he bethought him of the story of her life as told him by Margaret Craven. A short, sombre little story. She had been born and brought up in a primitive village, sunk among the chestnut woods of Southern Italy, and her English mother, who in the

land of her exile had concentrated all her power of loving upon her little daughter, had educated her to the best of her ability. At her death, her father, though indolent, extravagant and selfish, had roused himself from his sloth, and continued the cultivation of his daughter's rare gift of song. He had done this full of the thought that he would eventually turn her into a fine investment yielding him a good return. Being himself a musician of no mean order, the course of study that he imposed upon her was no sinecure. Vermont was cheap, the neighbours were friendly, and for a time he was fairly contented, till a chance visit to exquisite little Monaco, that scene of Nature's highest perfection and man's lowest debasement, set kindling his evil instincts. Caring nothing for the beauty, and drawn willingly into the vice, Vella forgot the home in the chestnut woods and the daughter to whom his absence gave intense relief. But in time he came back to her, a pauper. Broken in health, shattered in understanding, and soiled with a dishonour that forced him to flee beyond reach of discovery, he had hurried to her mother's country, and they had reached it just as death set its seal upon him. Then it was that he bethought him of his wife's kinswoman and bequeathed to her the daughter, concerning whom his conscience for the first time pricked him.

All this Margaret Craven had told Neil Vashon, adding that she had formed no definite plans for the girl's future.

Roma had come back to her seat on the tree trunk; some of the cherry blossoms were scattered on her lap; but up to her face she held a white tasselled tuft, her eyes were shut, their long lashes shadowed her cheeks, and she sat immovable as if she were asleep. He watched her till, with a soft little sigh, she opened wide her eyes, came away from dreamland and let fall the flowers.

"A penny," said Vashon, "but perhaps that is too poor

a price for your thoughts; they seem to have been pleasant ones."

"They were lovely ones. I won't sell them. I'll give them to you, and I'll tell you how you may always have them. Gather some flowers, shut your eyes very tight, smell the flowers, and see if lovely thoughts don't come to you. All the time I smelt the cherry blossom, I saw wonderful colours, not too bright; I thought of lovely music, not too loud, and of many happy things, that I cannot clearly define; but do as I say, shut your eyes, smell the flowers, and I'm certain you also will see and think of lovely things."

"But can't I see lovely things and think of them with my eyes open?"

As he spoke, he turned on his elbow and looked straight at her sweet Southern beauty; and knew that the drift of his speech had not reached her; truly, self-consciousness found no place in her.

"No, if you don't shut your eyes you will think of the things that are near you. Please do as I say, and perhaps you won't mind telling me some of the things you see, it's such a lovely game, and I play it every day. Please pull a flower."

Her sincerity amused him, her simplicity attracted him, and laughing at his folly, he stretched out his hand and plucked a wild orchid stem. Quickly she snatched it from him.

"Not that," she cried with unfeigned vexation. "Why did you gather that? Are there not hyacinths and primroses close beside you, and is not the hedge covered with prettier things, and look at the May blossom. Why did you gather the poison flowers, for they are plague-spotted, when sweet smelling ones surround you?"

"I only did as you bid me, foolish child, why look so serious?"

"It is plague spotted," she turned in her hand the succulent stem, with its crown of purple flowers. "If

you shut your eyes and smell it, there would come to you horrible thoughts that would hurt you." She fixed her serious eyes upon him and spoke soberly. "God gave it the plague-spots when he took them from the people. It was years, oh, hundreds of years ago, and the people in an Eastern city were all dying. Whole families died in agony, for the plague was upon them. And one evening a holy man, he was also a sage and prophet, went out into the fields, which were covered with the purple orchids, and falling upon his knees he asked God with all his soul to turn the plague away from the people. From sunrise to sunset he prayed, and when his prayers ceased, he saw that the purple orchids all around him were dotted with dark spots. Then he knew that God had heard his entreaties, and that the plague spots that covered the people now spotted the flowers. See them," she pointed out the dark specks that stained the bright petals. "If you had shut your eyes and smelt the flowers, you would have had horrid thoughts, for their smell is strong and bitter. I'll try it and tell you if it's not true."

With sudden graceful movement, she swung herself on to the tree trunk, and averting her face from him, she closed her eyes, and held the flowers before it, and he could not see its changing expression, nor hear the anxious sigh that slipped from her lips as the bitter breath of the flowers filtered into her lungs, filling her heart with a vivid memory. The rippling stream seemed suddenly to lap against the bank in a passion of great unrest, the soft sighing of the wind changed to a sudden shriek, a clammy chill overmastered the sunshine, and the way before her face was dark and dismal. Shrinking from the light, her feet moved fearfully along the fringe of darkness, till an outstretched hand gave her courage to creep from the shelter of the shadows. She could feel the trembling of her fingers as they closed over the dole that the hand held towards her, she could see the face of the man who

—Ah!" With a stifled cry Roma sprang from her seat.

"What," said Vashon, "were the thoughts as bad as all that?" He touched her hand lightly and felt its chill, then stood up, for the sound of voices came over the bridge, footsteps on the undergrowth crackled crisply, and between the trees there was a glimpse of the figures coming towards them.

"Some day you must tell me all about them, and after that you must never think anything but happy thoughts."

But Roma made him no answer, and her face was hidden from him. With trembling fingers she was gathering the cherry blossoms she had scattered, and he saw nothing of the pain and passion of her eyes, nothing of the grey shade that had stolen over her face. She was a child of many moods, he thought, as alone he walked to meet Margaret Craven and Printhorpe, who had come out to seek him, for she had slipped away from sight.

Through the woods ran Roma, heedless of the tinted patterns on the carpet of green things, crushing under foot the fairy companies of flowers that at other times she would have skirted so carefully, deaf to the seductive love-note of the pigeons who crooned in sympathy. The horror in her little heart gave wings to her feet, and it was not till she reached the shelter of the valley that she flung herself down and sobbed in gusts that shook her.

For to her it seemed as though the secret she had buried so deep that she herself had ceased to reopen the grave where she had laid it, was now about to be revealed, its hideous skeleton dragged into daylight. The more she wiped away her tears the faster they fell; so letting them flow at will she clasped her hands around her knees and swayed, to and fro, a pitiful little figure in the solitary heart of the valley, while all the past she had put away behind her rose up vividly before her. The long summer when, left alone, she had

lived her solitary simple life, happy enough in the sense of peace and rest that in her father's absence enwrapped her; alone, yet never lonely, for the peasants loved the motherless girl with the great eyes, dark and velvety as their own, who chattered to them and lived their life, as, with a coloured kerchief flung over her gleaming hair, that would slip and wander at will, she had worked in the vineyards, gathering the grapes, pressing them in the wine-press, laughing with the Joses and Stephanos, who revered her, coaxing the woman-kind, who worshipped her. For hours she had sung to an audience of green things, wild life and flowers, and the birds had blended their music with her sweet voice that rang through the woods. She knew their notes, the blackbird's whistle, the soft call of the cuckoo, the song of every bird was familiar to her as the language of the simple people who watched over her, and as she learned the fables they told her of the flowers, each blade and blossom became to her as a living thing with its appointed place in the roll-call of life. Thus she had lived, with no more thought for the morrow than the birds around her. Then came the time when her peace was broken, and she had to leave the happy place whose people loved her, to wander forth with her father to a place of gloom such as she had never believed was possible. Then the scenes that followed in quick succession, the grim misery, the garret, the fitful ravings of the dying father—"numero dix-neuf, rouge impair et passe." The chink of the coppers that had so beguiled him, that she had not had the heart to take away from him for bread. The sodden, drink-reddened face of the street-singer—her own attempt to gain money in the same miserable way, and her pitiful failure. Roma hid her face in her hands as the shame of that experience mounted in hot blood to her cheeks. Then nothing had seemed to matter. She was hungry, her father was dying, no one knew her in all that great, cruel, indifferent city. Her own inexperience of the

seamy side of town life made it all seem so simple. She was in want, there were generous hearts, she would stand in the shadows and some one would surely give. But it had been so much worse than she had imagined, she had fled from the first response to her appeals to find her father lying in the darkened garret, still clutching some of those pitiful copper coins, sunk in that last merciful unconsciousness that knows no awakening on this side of the grave.

But now! Roma stirred restlessly. No one must ever know all that lay buried in the unhappy past. Margaret, if she knew, would never forgive. She must never know. Yet suppose he had recognised her. Her heart stood still. Every misfortune seemed to date from that bitter night. Her dear little coin had somehow slipped from her neck. She loved it so, did it not bear upon it her dead mother's name? Poor, credulous mother, who had told her it would guard her from evil, and bring her good fortune. And now that child had disgraced herself, and the little amulet, sole relic of the dear, dead mother, was lost to her for ever. Roma bowed her head still lower, and the shame of her face covered her. But she raised it again, and gazed down the green vistas of the valley. All was not lost. He could not recognise her; he had seen her but in a flash of light. To him she was but a poor street singer. He was kind, and had held out his dole to her, but that was all. It was not likely that he had given even a passing thought to one out of the many who sang that night for bread. Her secret was safe, she would bury it deeper than ever. She shook off the last trace of fear, and made her way slowly towards the garden.

Turning aside to avoid Margaret, Roma paused by the old sun-dial, and pressed her hot forehead against its cool granite column. She could not face anyone while the tear stains were yet upon her cheek, the tell-tale traces in her eyes.

CHAPTER XV

PRINTHORPE'S APOLOGY

THE two men walked leisurely towards the house. Till now, they had scarcely been alone together that morning, and there had been no allusion to what Vashon described as Dolly's delirium; indeed, he had no desire for a renewal of the topic, which he instinctively felt that Printhorpe was longing to air. Last night he had listened to it with outward tolerance and with inward chafing at its extravagance, but he was now determined that he would allow him no lead whatever. He therefore talked of everything save the thing that would please Printhorpe most. He enlarged on the chances of trout-fishing, should the wind veer round to the south; of pike-fishing, should it remain where it was; and the other, though so keen a fisherman, replied mechanically. Walking through the orchards, Vashon pointed out the rose-coloured awning that the blossoms spread above them, and Printhorpe, with his eyes anywhere but on the dog, absently stated that Peter was a good deal thinner, and when Vashon laughed at him he coloured up like a lad, and impatiently slashed with his stick at a crest of white meadow-sweet. Then looking up at Vashon he could not but laugh himself.

"You snubbed me so last night, Neil, that I'm afraid to touch upon the only subject that I can think of."

"Snubbed you? there's gratitude! Why, I was like a father to you. I recommended early bed, a wet

towel round your head, and I offered to fetch out a doctor from Tenbury."

"In fact, you thought me a fool and treated me as such." He stood still, the laughter left his lips, a great earnestness came into his eyes. "Neil, 'pon my soul I should apologise down on my knees. It would have served me right if you had knocked me down for daring to connect——"

"Shut up, Dolly, old man, let's drop it. Anyhow reason has come with the light."

"I can't drop it, at least not till I have told you what a brick you were to bear with me."

"Well, as you will hammer on, I'll acknowledge that I thought your ideas were somewhat strong, to put it mildly, but I thought if I let you rave away you would be satisfied and eventually shut up. And no woman in the world is worth our falling out about, and so all things considered I bottled up what I felt."

"Neil, I'm dead sorry. But when one has carried about an idea for months it's a bit exciting to find it clothed in flesh. Jove, it makes me hot to think of what I said."

"You make me hot with the pace you walk; put the drag on a bit."

Printhorpe's footsteps slackened and there was silence between them till they reached the corner of the garden where Roma Vella, screened closely from sight by the dense yew-hedge yet leaned against the old sun-dial. The soft sward muffled the two men's footsteps, and she looked up startled, as Printhorpe stopped short and spoke with a passionate force the thoughts he could not repress.

"The coincidence is extraordinary. When the lamp light fell on the wretched little street singer, her hair gleamed like gold reflecting fire, and Miss Vella's——"

"Oh, dry up and come on, Dolly; there's the luncheon gong," interrupted Vashon, and, linking his arm in Printhorpe's with a laugh, he forced him forward.

"And Miss Vella's has the same effect whenever the sunshine catches it," continued Printhorpe and his enthusiasm grew greater. "To think that the world can contain two women with hair of that rare Venetian red, with a skin as softly tinted and pure as peach blossom, with eyes dark as night and clear as light, with a nose a sculptor would give anything to chisel in marble, a mouth ——"

"Oh, spare me the rest of the catalogue," groaned Vashon, holding out his hands, as though to ward off further speech. Then he turned and fled up the steps out of hearing.

So the blow had fallen. Roma Vella sat in the garden, and it seemed to her as though time had come to a standstill. A brown thrush thrilled a glad litany that she did not listen to; a broad-backed bee, so happy in its state of honey drunkenness, came humming, and she did not notice it, the sun rays in which she loved to bask held no delight for her, for some words that beat as a sledge hammer on the anvil of her brain deadened her senses. "As the lamp light fell on the wretched street singer." These words had frozen the blood in her face, leaving it white as chalk, had filled the dark depths of her eyes with fear, had set the corners of her mouth all of a quiver. Over and over again she repeated them, at times with feverish haste, then with measured distinctness that fell to frightened whispering.

She sat stunned, blind and deaf to all sights and sounds, with the words ringing in her brain. Then a pause—and all creation took them up and flung them at her. They were rung out by the tiny swinging harebells. The grass, as it bent to the breeze, whispered them, the blackbird called them out to the chaffinch in the hedge behind her, and in a quick flash of passion, born of fear, she flung her handkerchief at it. But the chaffinch only flew higher and chattered louder.

"'The wretched little street singer,' that is me.

'She had hair like gold and fire, like Miss Vella's,' and I am she, and he has not forgotten, and now I know and understand why he has looked at me with such strange eyes, and why I have felt them even when I did not meet them. It's my miserable hair that has set him thinking."

With all the hot rebel blood astir in her, she clutched at a wandering curl, some golden threads entwined themselves round her finger, and the wind danced them into the distance.

"How difficult life was," thought this poor little child of the South. "At home, in the vineyards, it had seemed so simple. To laugh, to sing, to eat when one was hungry, to sleep when one was tired, to speak the truth and hide nothing, because one had nothing to hide; to trust, because everyone was good to her, to be open as the light that flooded the old garden. And now—oh, it was all so hard and difficult. She must act a part, must watch her every word and look lest they should betray her. If he should think such a thing possible of her," and again the burning red mounted to her brow. She must avoid the man who held her fate in his hands, and in a little while he would go away, and she would be happy and glad again in the beautiful new life that had been given to her here, where she was learning to love Margaret for her great goodness to her, in spite of the reserve and chill of her outward manner.

By degrees Roma took comfort. The birds sang the songs she had learned in the chestnut woods, the flowers were just as sweet, and the world was gay around her in the happy springtime of the year. In summer the tones would deepen; autumn would bring the russet brown and the scarlet berries; these things were life to her, and the winter—ah well, she had no thought of that.

So Roma took heart again, and a little later she went into the room where the others had almost finished

lunch, and no one could detect any trace of the distress that had swept over her so recently.

Yes, she was hungry, she said in answer to Margaret, and made a brave attempt to eat the food she felt would choke her, and conversation was resumed at the point where her entrance had checked it.

"I rather thought of Norway," said Printhorpe, "of course we know it well, but it is years since we have been there."

"And now we should find it blocked with bicyclists, and amateur photographers taking snapshots at the mountains, the fjords and each other, chucking sandwich papers about, destroying the peace of day, and probably making the night hideous. I wonder the midnight sun does not hide its face from the loathsome horde of cheap trippers." Vashon turned to Roma. "Miss Vella, advise us where we shall let the yacht take us."

Ripples of delight ran over Roma's face; she thought they were about to take their departure. She began to feel hungry.

"Ceylon," she cried quickly, "and if you start at once, you won't find it too hot when you get there."

"Let us first finish lunch, and then we'll put on our hats, and make a rush for it. We can't do it much quicker than that, though indeed we hadn't thought of going so far."

Roma saw that he laughed at her; she coloured up, and felt she had been foolish, and as Printhorpe spoke she kept her eyes upon her plate.

"Lady Margaret," urged Stephen, "couldn't we induce you to take a yachting trip, you and Miss Vella?"

Margaret Craven shook her head. Vashon did his best to urge her to consider the suggestion, and for a moment a pair of blue eyes met a pair of very dark eyes, but the dark eyes were the first to fall.

"But, Neil, must you take this trip?" said Margaret.

"There is no must about it, but we thought we'd fancy it, and ordered the yacht to be got ready im-

mediately. The worst of it is, we have been to most places, and there's really only one place that I now feel inclined for."

A little sigh of relief from Roma. They would both go to it. She hoped it was a long way off.

"Where is it, and what's it like?" asked Printhorpe.

"Oh, it's pretty enough, and once there one is extremely comfortable;" he looked towards Margaret and laughed; "and there are no perils by sea in order to get to it, and 'pon my word, I think that for a while we'll just stay where we are."

No one heard the catch of Roma's breath, for Margaret's expression of pleasure completely covered it.

"Personally, nothing would please me better," broke in Printhorpe. Was there anything in the world would please him half as well? "It is indeed peaceful here, and perfect." He glanced at the shapely curve of a head now turned away from him, at its masses of silken sunny hair. His heart leaped high with a glow of glad triumph, and the enthusiasm in his voice gave Margaret a strange sense of pleasure.

"It's just the place for you, Dolly," said Vashon; "you know you said you only wanted to sit in the sun and do nothing; but Miss Vella, we won't let him be too idle, at all events you must teach him to tie up cowslip balls; I think he might even stand the exertion of tossing them, and perhaps they will give him a longer life than they gave me."

Something in the girl's eyes silenced him. But it was the wish that those two should learn to like each other that had prompted him to try and draw them together, and she was such a charming child, so fresh and as yet so utterly unspoilt. In a little while she would willingly gratify Stephen's great desire, and let him paint her lovely face, and he would then forget the moonshine fancy, and the will-of-the-wisp delusion that had haunted him, and be at rest. Dear old Dolly, how glad he was that he had brought him here.

As they left the room, Vashon placed his hand on Margaret's arm, and drew her into the garden, and Roma and Printhorpe for the first time were left together.

CHAPTER XVI

THE SILVER COIN WITH SCARLET LETTERS

NEITHER spoke. Apparently Roma's interest was entirely centred in watching the movements of a ladybird that strolled over the gillyflowers she had placed in one of the blue dragon bowls that morning, and so still was she that she might have been a marvel of chiselled marble, soft, clear and entrancingly tinted. But her silence did not affect Stephen Printhorpe; as far as he was concerned she might have remained dumb for ever and a day, and into his mind there came a recollection of the words he had once said to Vashon, "If only I could once paint my ideal's haunting face, the breadth of the world might then come between us." He could have stood for hours and studied the perfection of the face before him, and time would have flashed fast as light. But to Roma it moved with leaden feet, and the tension becoming unbearable, she put out her hand and touched the tiny scarlet wings. The ladybird frightened, flew against her breast, and Printhorpe broke the spell of silence.

"The touch of the ladybird brings luck, and you should wish, Miss Vella, for whatever you want."

The sound of his voice was as a spark put to tinder, and her own rang with the vexation she could not hide.

"I have wished," she said, "I have wished something with my whole heart."

For a second her eyes met his, and the look in them was ill fitted to the seraphic presence he desired for his

picture. She put her hand against her throat; the feeling it was so hard to stifle seemed to strangle her, and she scared the ladybird, which winged its way to Stephen.

"And now," he said, "it's my turn to wish, though indeed I think I have everything I most wanted. Yes, I'm satisfied. So shall I give you back the ladybird?"

Very carefully he put a flower petal beneath it and held it towards her. Roma would not see it; she turned away, but a moment's reflection told her she betrayed too much. She must school herself. In the distance she caught a glimpse of Neil Vashon as he walked beside his cousin, and wished that she were with him for the sake of the sense of security and rest that his presence gave her. She moved towards the door that opened on to the lawn, then turned reluctantly to Printhorpe.

"I'm going to look for Lady Margaret, and you—of course you will wish to go back to the picture gallery."

"It looks so delightful out. I spent the greater part of the morning in the gallery, and if you have no objection, perhaps you will let me come with you."

He stood a little aside in the doorway so that she might pass him, but Roma stood stock still. She had a whole load of objections; the weightiest of all, that the very sight of him unnerved her. She could not, would not walk across the fields with him. She made a feeble effort to give a small smile.

"I'm quite forgetting that I haven't sung to-day, and I get so out of practice if I don't sing daily. Yes, you're right, the day is lovely, and you are wise in wishing to be out, and perhaps you will tell Lady Margaret that I'm going to have a good long practice. They have probably gone down to the lake, and if you walk to the end of the avenue and cross the fields to the right, you'll find a little path that will bring you straight up to them."

At last she had managed to speak several consecutive

words to him. Roma felt quite pleased with herself. Perhaps in time it might not seem quite so hard. She longed to rush past him, but common courtesy demanded a moment's patience, and during that moment Printhorpe thought that, if possible, he would listen to and look at her while she was singing, for surely her voice would call forth the expression that would be needed for his angel's face.

"Miss Vella, it would be more than kind if you would let me listen while you sing. It's early yet and a dead certainty that the day will keep fine; later on we can join the others, so perhaps you will let me sit in a corner of the music room." "She doesn't look too well pleased," he thought, "but that I must put up with."

"Oh, I couldn't sing a note if anyone were listening."

Then she remembered that last night she had sung song after song. But that had been a very different matter; then she had not recognized him, and he had sat aside with Margaret and studied the Art Magazine, while the other had drawn his chair beside her. "You won't like it, I'm going to practise exercises and scales," she added in desperation.

"I love scales," he laughed, "above all other music."

There was no answering laugh, only an angry flash in her eyes, and he moved away. He was acting an ignoble part, forcing himself where he was not wanted, then as she spoke he turned towards her.

"If you don't mind exercises and scales, by all means come to the music room."

She hurried towards it, and Printhorpe followed her. After all, what mattered her little show of petulance? She would forget it as soon as she began to sing; her scales and exercises he did not believe in, and he would soon catch sight of the needed expression. It was a great stroke of luck to get her alone. Last night the Art Magazine had interfered sadly.

Roma sat down on the music stool with scarcely her usual grace; the seat was too high, she jumped up, spun

it round and round with such impetus that the top flew off and rolled at Printhorpe's feet. Forgetting herself she laughed: hers was such a pretty laugh, so soft, musical and sweet, and Printhorpe joined in it, as he knelt to adjust the seat in its socket. Biting her lips, she sat down by the piano. One comfort was the scales would very soon scare him away.

There were at least fifty of Conconi's exercises contained in each book. She would begin them at the beginning and he would have fled long before she approached the end. Up and down the scales trilled Roma, her voice swelling higher, clearer, rising and falling, as her hands raced over the keyboard, and Printhorpe, who had taken a seat in the window recess from where he could obtain a view of her face, saw small trace of an angelic aspect upon it. She was evidently a young woman whose moods were as varied as the notes of her voice, fitful as the uncertain gleam of the opal, changeable as a day in April. He looked with interest at the column of her white throat, at the tiny tendrils of hair that, curled upon her neck, lay lightly over her ear and circled her forehead. From time to time she brushed her hand impatiently against her brow, but the little curls fell back again, pretty as ever. Printhorpe sought in his pocket and found a pencil, tore the unwritten sheet off the back of a letter, and propping the paper on his knee he sketched in the outline of the beautiful little head, with its rippling nimbus of curls, and was soon oblivious of the fact that she was singing.

With a jerk Roma turned over a page of the exercise book, and sang a fresh series of scales.

"He's deaf, or he'd have gone long ago," she muttered angrily, and trilled clearer and faster, and did not cast a glance at Printhorpe.

"I declare I'll squall like a cat," she pitched her voice to the limit of its compass, and struck up an accompaniment in another key.

Printhorpe looked up. There was something extraordinarily odd about it; then went on with the sketch, which was almost completed.

"I'll scream like a peacock."

Lifting her voice she let out a strange shrill sound. Drawing down her hands she stood up and burst into the laughter she could not control, and took a look at Printheorpe, who was carefully folding up a piece of paper.

"You have no ear for music," she cried, the mutinous mirth on her lips, and a suspicion of tears in her eyes. "The piano has something wrong with it;" she struck a sharp discord; "and my voice is out of tune, but I'm going on for ages, oh, for hours," and thought, "I shall be hoarse for the rest of my life if I do."

She sat down again, so did Printheorpe, and Roma's hopes flew fast. It would be better far to be out than to have to sit where she was, and to know and feel that he was listening and looking at her. Outside the sun was high, the birds were calling, and the frankincense of flowers was stealing in through the window.

"Later on I shall go on singing but now I'm going to look for the others." She walked away, and paused again; she must not overdo it. "Perhaps you would also like to find them."

"Thank you, I should," was all Printheorpe said, and wished she had sat at the piano a few minutes longer.

Roma walked rapidly down the avenue, and longed to saunter, for the day was uncommonly hot. Her feet scuffled up a good deal of dust, she gave her skirts a little shake and the dust flew on to Printheorpe. Crossing the stile she ignored his outstretched hand, caught her ribbon trimming in a nail, and walked on with it hanging in festoons about her, while vainly she fumbled for a pin, and had to accept the one offered her. Passing by the stream, where that morning she had sat with Vashon, a fair sized trout leaped high in sunlight, and splashed back again. This was an

irresistible sight; she stood still, watched for it, and was rewarded as it rose for the insects that had their being on the babbling waters; then swam back to the deep dark pools and took cover under a stone.

Printhorpe glanced at the fallen tree trunk.

"The trout will rise again if we have the patience to wait."

Roma hesitated. She loved to see the fish leap high and turn like silver Catherine wheels back into the water. She also glanced at the tree trunk and saw lying upon it a faded wild orchid flower, its proud purple darkened and dying. Would she ever for one moment forget that which the plague spotted flower had told her? Printhorpe gave his shoulders a little shrug and kept pace with her. Her moods were amusing.

"Oh dear! fancy if the others have left the lake," she said more to herself than her companion.

"That would indeed be a tragedy, considering the desperate efforts we are making to reach them."

"I like walking fast."

"It's delightful, shall we run?"

She sped on proudly till, catching her foot in the ribbon festoon that had slipped its moorings, she found herself upon her knees. Springing to her feet she gave a couple of ignominious hops, and would have fallen, had not Printhorpe caught at her elbow and kept her balance, while with the other hand he disentangled the ribbon that fettered her foot. Then they hurried on with the pace that belongs to mid-winter.

The sun and the south beat down upon them, and Roma looked to the path that wound through the wood. It was the longest way to the lake, but the emerald arcades would give a kindly shade. Her remark to that effect was received in silence.

She had offended him! How uncivil she had been, how stupid, how short-sighted. She pointed out the very evident fact that the flank of the hill was riddled with rabbit holes. She clapped her hands, and there

was a rush and scurry of white scuds, that vanished down the little brown houses that keep their doors wide open. But Printhorpe apparently did not see them. His thoughts were centred on his all absorbing interest. The lady of moods, would she even consent to sit for him? Under her eyelashes she took another look at him, and thought he bore out the idea that she had long since formed of Sir Launcelot. In another moment they would have reached the end of the wood, the lake would be at their feet, the tiresome walk would be ended, and then he would talk to Margaret. She leaped lightly through a gap into the open. Then both stood still at the sight of the sheen of silver and gold that lay upon the lake, only its outside edges were coloured a heaven-born blue.

"How beautiful!" simultaneously broke from the lips of both.

For a moment they looked into each other's eyes with gladness. Roma's heart was full of the glory spread before them—in Printhorpe's there was room for another thought.

"Yes," he said slowly, "'tis one of the most perfect things that ever the sun-god shone down upon."

Roma's feet trod the sward more slowly. There was so little place in this world of light for the shadows that seemed to darken the blue and make the green grow dim. In her short-lived flush of delight at the radiance all around her, she hummed some snatches of an old Italian love song. A dip in the dell, their feet touched the water's edge, the snatch of song was silenced, and the tragedy in her voice nearly made Printhorpe laugh.

"They are not here. I can see them nowhere."

"Accept my most profound sympathy. Personally I hope to recover from the shock,"

"I thought you were so devoted to Mr. Vashon," her chagrin moving her to make the poorest attempt at sarcasm.

“So I am, but mercifully we can comfortably stand some separation. Devoted to Neil,” he echoed, “yes, that I truly am.”

“I don’t wonder, he is so nice and so kind;” she felt sorry and ashamed.

“I suppose he is, but I don’t think I ever analysed his qualities. I only know that he is the very best of fellows, and that is the highest praise that one man can give to another.”

“How extraordinarily tall he is; when he comes into a room it seems ages before one’s eyes get up to his head.”

“Yes, and so strong. He used to be one of the best athletes in all England, and was at one time a magnificent sportsman.”

“Isn’t he all that now?”

“He could be if he liked, but I fancy he has ceased to be keen.”

“I wonder why,” said Roma.

“Do you, my little Southern spitfire?” thought Printheorpe. “Well, you can wonder away to your heart’s content.” It was pleasant to talk about Neil to anyone who appreciated him, but the topic had its limits. Neil’s confidences were very sacred. He ventured a bold stroke and feared a severe snub. “Miss Vella, do let me scull you round the lake just once before we start a fresh steeplechase after the others. I won’t bore you with a single word, and you can turn your back so that you needn’t even see me.”

“I don’t mind how much you talk,” she conceded with an uncertain smile, “nor have I any desire to be so rude.”

In the distance, sheltered from their sight by a clump of rhododendrons, Margaret Craven and Vashon watched them, for he had prevented her from rising to meet them.

“Let’s leave them alone, Margaret. See, he is going to scull her round the lake. How pretty she is.”

“Yes, Roma is pretty,” Margaret did not know how little enthusiasm there was in her voice.

"Tired?" Neil looked at her kindly; she shook her head and he went on again.

"Stephen is ~~so~~ full of life, he is such a ripping companion, and she seems a light-hearted little soul, so they'll enjoy themselves together. We staid old fogies will sit still."

The butt of Margaret's parasol gave the ground an impatient prod.

"Why talk as if you were decrepit, Neil? I thought there were only four years between you and Mr. Printhorpe."

"Yes, that's all. But a man is supposed to be as old as he feels, and so there's a score of years between us."

"And a woman is as old as she looks," Margaret gave a little sigh. "Yes, Neil, you are right, we are old fogies. Ah me!" she thought drearily, "was I ever anything else?"

Rona took her seat in the skiff and sat stiff as the sword flags that grew by the bank. Printhorpe took up the sculls, and as a bird on the wing the boat sped over the water. The knowledge that he had forced himself upon her held him somewhat silent, and she had little desire to speak, for the sense of unrest that his companionship gave her outweighed her delight in skinning over the glistening lake. The upright angle becoming irksome, she leaned back, and he held a cushion towards her. She shook her head, she preferred being without it. With a little smile, for there was something so childish in her petulance, he propped it behind her. A pucker gathered on her brow, but almost instantaneously passed away; she leaned back again, and lay at ease with the despised cushion behind her head, and fanned herself with the broad leaf of the water lily, and listened to the lapping water. The soothing monotony of the sound made her drowsy, the sunshine caressed her eyelids and they drooped, heavy with sleep, over the eyes that tears had tired. Watching her, Printhorpe almost held his breath, and longed that

for a few moments she might pass into the unconsciousness of sleep. Then without fear of detection he could feast his eyes upon her.

The lily leaf yet waved, but only fitfully to and fro, then it fell from her hand and the skulls scarcely skimmed the water. Drawing them in, with a little sigh of great content Printhorpe leaned forward. Sun kisses had heightened the wild-rose tint of her cheek, but her neck and forehead were white as snow. Her lips were parted, he could see the gleam of her white teeth between them, and from the wandering curls that roamed over her brow to the dimple that dented her chin, nothing escaped the artist's eye.

A water-mole bounding out of its hole with a splash put an end to his silent contemplation. Roma sat up with a start, and Printhorpe could have wrung the neck of the bright-eyed furry thing that, all unconscious of its crime, nibbled the osiers.

"I wasn't asleep," she hastily explained, rubbing her eyes, she sat up uncomfortably straight, stretched like a kitten, then nestled back again. "I was thinking."

"And so was I," smiled Stephen.

"Of your pictures, of course," she said sleepily.

"Of one picture, yes, I was thinking of it. I seldom think of anything else."

Something in his voice roused her, she looked at him with unfeigned interest.

"May I tell you about it? If it won't bore you," he said eagerly; he longed to talk of it, and forgot to wait for an answer. "I worked at it for months and left, as I thought, nothing undone that could perfect it, and night after night I used to go and study the scene where I had laid it, the light on the water, the gloom and fog, the dreariness of the Embankment."

With a sudden lurch the skiff leaned to the left, as with outstretched arm Roma sought to pluck a waxen water lily, and with a keen disappointment he accepted her rebuff. Her face was averted, she had not listened

to a word he had been saying. Almost savagely he took up the sculls, the skiff sped faster than ever, and the sun falling full in his face dazzling his sight, he could not see the fear that dilated her eyes.

Then into them came a look of defiance, for Roma was fighting against her want of control.

"You were telling me of your pictures," she said, and wondered if her voice sounded harsh to him.

But to Printhorpe it only sounded wearied and void of interest, and not caring to discuss the thing that was all the world to him with one who was unsympathetic, he took no heed of her attempt to continue a conversation that so evidently bored her. Roma breathed more freely and forgot all about the flower she had never wanted.

Printhorpe remembered it, and looking about him he caught sight of a lily that lay beside the bank. He gathered it for her, and as he cut away part of its succulent stem he forgot his wounded feeling, and thought its beauty flawless, exquisite as her own. Laying his knife carelessly down upon the seat, it would have slipped to the bottom of the boat, had not Roma put her hand upon the chain that linked his knife and watch together.

Something hung down from his chain. It flashed brightly in the sunshine. Scarlet letters were all aglitter, they danced wildly before her eyes; each seemed to hustle the other before they settled down and spelt the word Lucia. She dared not look at Printhorpe, who leaning over the side shook away the water that lay within the water lily cup. Then he held the flower towards her. One glance, and it fell from his fingers.

"Ah, it is yours," he touched the coin; his voice rang out over the water.

"No, no," with quick urgent denial she answered him, and pushed it into his hand.

"God! I'm sorry," the hidden thought rose up from the very depth of his heart

Averting his eyes, in charity, from her face, he put the coin back in his pocket, and took up the skulls in silence.

His every doubt had been swept away. That glance at the girl's bleached face had told him its story. Told him that his first instinct had not misled him; that he and Roma Vella had met together on that bitter winter night: but the knowledge gave him no pleasure.

The lily lay at the bottom of the boat, its waxen purity tarnished, its petals bruised and broken. He looked at it, then at last he looked at her.

Roma had nestled back against the cushion, her foolish heart now hugging the thought that she had not betrayed herself. The die was cast now, the evil moment that she had dreaded and which seemed so unlikely had come and passed for ever. The "No" had sprung from her lips without a moment's reflection, in sheer self-defence. The time had not yet come to regret it. She was saved. That was her only thought. But side by side with the relief sprang up unreasonable aversion to the man from whom the danger had threatened her. Forgetful that he alone had befriended her in the hour of her humiliation and terror, she remembered only that he held the threads of her very destiny in his strong, relentless hands. Her heart swelled with dumb unreasoning resentment. The sight of him filled her with vague alarm, and a thousand fears sprang up in his presence, and died down only in his absence. Like a hunted animal from its pursuers she would fain flee from the eyes that seemed to have gathered such intensity. She had lied to him. Why had he forced her to stoop so low, to shelter behind a pitiful lie from which there was no retreat? Oh, it was his fault. She would not shrink from the consequences. Perhaps now he would leave her alone. She would defy him. Who would believe his tale and link the wretched street singer with Roma Vella?

With a vivid flush on her face, with all the rich

colour come back to her lips, and with burning eyes, she looked at him.

"God! I'm sorry," again to himself Printhorpe said it. Neil, he thought should never know. Why make the world a darker place to him than he already thought it? The skiff skimmed towards the shore where Vashon and Margaret Craven were waiting to greet them.

CHAPTER XVII

THE ZINGARI RIBBON

It was Sunday. The church bell rang out fitfully, for the ringer had long passed the allotted span of life, and the bell was cracked. On the day that England celebrated King George the Fourth's accession he had for the first time pulled the bell-rope, his father lifting his baby boy high in his arms had bade him grab it with his podgy wee hands, and pull it for all he was worth. Come to years of discretion, Jimmy had slipped easily into his father's shoes, and had taken over office as sexton, a simple matter, for matins and evensong on Sundays and a sprinkling of extra services throughout the year were the sum total of church attendance expected from the folk of the country-side. On these occasions Jimmy, having pulled the bell, had to put in an appearance in church, and hand round the plate, if it so happened that no churchwarden was present. As the neighbourhood on the whole was healthy, the digging of graves was not a very constant occurrence, and Jimmy had rather prided himself on the excellent architecture of the last houses that each tenant would ever require. But the christenings were his bugbear, and he had grumbled and growled and snarled, and had breathed no benediction upon the new born lambs, whose introduction to the flock made demands upon him of a small amount of time and trouble. On the day when a worthy farmer and his wife had brought their nineteenth offspring to the font, he had glared at them and muttered none too softly, "Pshaw! I'm

damned if they don't deserve to be taxed," and under cover of the infant's manifest dislike to water, a dislike it retained through life, Jimmy, who had gleaned some smattering of Biblical teaching, had spluttered, "Frederick John, indeed! Pshaw! why don't they call the screaming brat Omega!"

Year after year Jimmy dug and delved, scraped and scuffled the churchyard and kept the church clean, fulfilled each detail of his office, and none said him nay, till there came the day of his downfall. It came at a time when for miles round the country made merry, and when the flag in the great house was hoisted high in honour of the birth of Lady Margaret's little brother, the young heir to Wybourne Court and the broad lands that belonged to it. For the people, there was dancing on the green and dinner in the barns, and bonfires blazed on every hill, and when the nurse held, for a second, a bundle of white to the window, the tenants had gone half mad with glee. "Twasn't a boy and 'twasn't a girl," argued the old woman who lived in the lodge, "but 'twas a heir, and a fine strong one too."

The little sallow-faced daughter of the great house had crept on tip-toe towards the young king's cot, and touched him ever so gently, then with wondering eyes she had stroked her own homely little nose, for the nurses had laughed and told her it was out of joint.

Jimmy had kept pace with the best of the merry-makers, and then he had gone beyond them. Saturday night found him quarrelsome, keenly anxious to take off his coat and fight the statue of William Pitt that was erected outside the village reading-room. Sunday found him tearful, but kind, and so gentle a child might have played with him, and all went well till the time came when he must walk the church with the plate. The tessellated pavement worried him greatly, the Pompeian red and black stones seemed somehow to have got loose, and he fancied they must trip

him up; but he kept his sea-legs, and few noticed anything amiss, till he passed the brass eagle that formed the lectern. It was then that Jimmy's legs seemed to collapse as telescopes, and the money in the plate ran an irresponsible career all over the church. Claspings his arms round the eagle, he had smiled benignly, and in jaunty tone cried aloud to the scandalised congregation:

"If it hadn't been for the dear old duck I don't know where I'd have got to."

Having sinned past all hope of pardon, Jimmy was thrown out of office. Degraded and ashamed, he grovelled like a worm and wished he was dead. But by virtue of the good name his father had left behind, and by reason of his unfeigned shame and sorrow, none forbade it when the new sexton, not keen on doing it himself, permitted Jimmy to continue to ring the bell; and so it came to pass that, year in year out, he pulled away at the bell rope. He pulled it when the young heir was buried, when the old earl and his wife were lowered into the vault that held their boy; he pulled, and tried to pull it briskly, when the Lady Margaret married the man who made her miserable, and when he and the tiny child were laid together, Jimmy was again at his post. And on this sweet spring morning he was there, pulling the bell rope fitfully, drowsily, for the poor old sinner's sands were sinking fast.

Relations between the Rectory and the Court were exceedingly strained. The old Rector had visited the widow at the time of her affliction. His zeal had eaten him up, and he had inculcated not only resignation but positive gratitude for the sorrow which had befallen her, which was, he assured her, a blessing in disguise. He took her stony silence as mute consent, rushed in with clumsy feet where angels would have paused, and continued to enlarge on the goodness of Providence, that had taken her child lest its father's

sin should be visited in this life upon its head Margaret had stared at him dully, she had pressed her temples with her knuckles, and stared at him again so strangely that his flesh began to creep. Then the look of a wounded tigress had leaped to her eyes, and her silence was broken. The Rector left the house hastily.

Failing her own church Margaret Craven had adopted no other. Long ago, in her neglected childhood, she had learnt from her nurses a creed of fear which her maturing mind rejected. She became a sceptic through absolute ignorance of any softer, higher ideal of faith. Experience of life had only embittered her, and with her hopes of earthly happiness she had habitually crushed down all aspirations of the spirit. She was no opponent of any kind of faith, she did not care enough, but the episode of the Rector's visit to her in her affliction, and the form his consolation took, roused in her a cynical attitude of mind in which she unjustly included all active professors of modern Christianity. Roma Vella, whose heart already inclined to simple unreasoning faith could so easily have been turned to great and good account, found in her no kindly potter who would mould its soft clay aright.

The girl's religious views were of a very hazy make and vague description. The faith of her father had at one time great attractions for her, and she had worshipped in the little chapel that nestled in the chestnut woods of lovely Lucca. Kneeling beside the peasants she had counted her beads and had prattled her "Ave Marias" by the dozen, with her eyes turned piously to the plaister Christ. But like her mother, Roma had never joined the faith, partly because things seemed quite comfortable as they were, partly because she had inherited her mother's pride of race, together with a traditional attachment to the religion of their forefathers.

Having read the Life of Luther, Roma concluded that the rigid Protestants were alone God's children, and by

the time she had finished Arnold's "Light of Asia," she was convinced that the disciple of Buddha was a chosen child of grace. Latterly she had almost ceased to think of these high things beyond her reach, and this morning few of the household from Wybourne Court, only some of the servants and one of the guests, observed the call that poor old Jimmy rang out from the belfry.

Neil Vashon and Roma Vella listened to it, and with her feet on the lower step of the style and her elbows resting on the lower bar Roma watched the country-folk who were on their way to worship.

Women, who spent the greater part of the week at the wash-tub, striving, scrubbing, mowing and toiling, with scarce a moment in which to sit with hands folded in peace, now came forth, dressed in their best, innumerable children scuffling up the dust behind them, and their mankind shuffling beside them. There were also maidens with a whole month's earnings sunk in the gaudy headpiece which wobbled uncertainly on their heads, and young men all too shy to do more than cast sheep's eyes at the maidens. Later on in the day things would look up a bit, and the lad who could only ogle a lass when the sun was high in the heavens could comfortably put an arm about her when that self-same sun began to climb down again.

Roma looked at them with interest, and occasionally turned to speak to Vashon, who sat upon the grass a little to one side of her.

"I have half a mind to go to church," she said to him.

"If you like to make it a whole mind, I'll go with you."

"I'll think it over. I have no gloves."

"That you can remedy, but please yourself."

"There is the prettiest baby you ever saw in all your life waddling towards us up the lane. Do get up and look at it."

"I'll see quite enough of it from where I am, and I'd give it a fit if it saw me."

"It's a perfect pink and white pet. I'd like to kiss it."

"Heavens above!" he shuddered, and Roma from her height looked down at him severely.

"Have you never seen a face that you feel you'd give anything to kiss?"

"Yes, I have," he said, with his eyes on the young loveliness above him.

"Well, do get up," she coaxed, "and see the child, and you'll agree with me."

Obediently Vashon dragged himself upright, just as the baby fell flat on its face and rose up red and roaring.

Roma stepped down from the stile, and with another shudder Vashon said as he sat down again:

"'Pon my soul, I'd as soon think of kissing this frog," he touched a great green frog that hopped away in a fever of fear.

"You certainly didn't see it at its best. I'm going to church. Oh dear, the bell has done ringing."

"Then I'll come with you, and we'll hurry to the house and you can get your gloves. Very likely we shall meet Stephen."

This last idea played havoc with her intention.

But the days since Printhorpe had sculled her round the lake had passed better than she could ever have expected. Margaret Craven looking less dreary, less as if life were a gift she had not asked for, and one she little liked, and who had found so many interests in common with him, had been specially kind to her, and she with her heart full of defiance, had schooled herself not to shrink away from him—and so diligently had she learned her self-inflicted lesson, that at times she quite forgot her deep dislike to him; at other times it was a very evident fact.

It was very evident now, and puckers of discontent

crumpled up her forehead as Vashon hailed Printhorpe.

"Going to church, Dolly? Hold on a moment, Miss Vella's only got to get her gloves, and we'll all go together."

"No, I haven't, at least I was, I mean I'm not going to get them. I think I'll stay with cousin Margaret," cried Roma with incoherent haste.

"She's a creature of impulse," said Vashon with a little shrug of his shoulders. But Stephen was well on his way. At her first words, almost at her first frown, he had hurried forward without a second glance at her.

With an instinctive knowledge that Neil Vashon was vexed with her, she held her peace, and looked straight at a squirrel scuttling up a tree trunk, but it was not the squirrel she was thinking of.

"Stephen's put on pace," said Vashon, looking at the last glimpse of his friend's figure. "Anyone would think he was doing the finish for the flat race." A pause, then suddenly, "You don't like him."

"No, I dislike him."

The question so startled her that her words had escaped before she realised they were spoken. It was too late to amend them.

"I can't understand it; your dislike is singular."

"He's so stupid," faltered Roma feebly.

"That you know he isn't."

"Well, conceited."

"Conceited! Come, that's a precious bad shot; why, he's as simple, as simple as, as . . ."

"Old Jimmy," broke in Roma mischievously, nodding towards the ancient bell-ringer, who having finished his job now leaned against the gate with a smile of senile imbecility.

"You're very naughty," laughed Vashon. As well be vexed with the blue butterflies fluttering through the fields.

"I only helped you out, I thought you were seeking something simple."

Vashon shook his head at her, and the tolerant light in his eyes deepened. But things looked bad for Dolly's picture. That must not be allowed, and if they did not mend he must try and improve them. On that point Dolly must not be disappointed. To Roma's distress, he returned to Printhorpe, and his voice was graver.

"I wish you would try and get over your dislike to him; for one thing it is uncalled for, for another it is unkind, for a third you are at home here, he is a stranger, and it's discourteous. I should be sorry if sooner than inconvenience you he went away." He broke off dismayed. "Oh, what a brute I have been!" for a hot flush covered her face, her mouth quivered, and her lashes glistened. "Roma," he cried forgetting himself, "Good Lord! I never meant to hurt you. What have I done? What a blundering fool I am! She'll never speak to me again," he thought miserably, but this fear was quickly dispelled.

"I'm so sorry," she said with honest concern. "Indeed I'll try ever so hard to like him. I'll talk to him all day long, if you think it won't bore him. I will indeed."

Beneath Vashon's relief there came another feeling that was not to be deciphered.

"There is no need for that," he said hastily with much decision, "oh no, none at all."

"You shall never," she sighed, "have cause to say it again, and oh! Cousin Margaret, who likes him so much, how angry she would be with me if she knew what I'd said."

"That she will never know. Yes, Margaret likes him immensely," in his voice was now only enthusiasm. "I have never seen her come out of her shell so quickly. Hark! she's playing," he said, as the sound rolled out above them, full and deep, yet breathing peace. The heart of the player soothed itself with the sounds her fingers drew out from the soul of the organ. "We won't disturb her; come back to the fields, I shall then know that I am forgiven."

Under the shade of a laburnum's drooping glory Roma sat silent for a while, the sun winnowing a fret-work of light all around her, and turning away deliberately from the past that had stolen all the milk and honey from life, Neil sat where he could see her. The thought that they were alone, save for the untamed life around them, gave him pleasure; it smoothed all traces of sternness from his face, and his eyes were now as they used to be. Hers were slowly wandering over the world around her, noticing the basket work that the tangle of green twigs had plaited in the hedge, the snow flakes of blossom that the cherry trees scattered upon the ground, the meadow-sweet, the flaming dandelion discs. She gathered a clock, idly blew away the down, and said the evening was closing in, the clock had told her it was seven. Vashon felt glad that the day was yet young, for it seemed to be so golden. The next moment her eyes were attracted by the ribbon band that encircled Vashon's hat.

"Tis pretty," she said, "for it's bright, and the black in it keeps the other colours quiet."

He took off the hat and put his finger on the ribbon.

"They are the Zingari colours, and their arrangement is supposed to have a meaning. The black is the darkness, the red the fire, and the yellow is the light. Out of darkness, through fire, into light. I, however, began life the contrary way."

"Out of light, through fire, into darkness—do you mean that?"

"Yes, that was it."

"Ah, that was sad, so sad."

Her pity was very sweet to him, and somehow to-day nothing seemed sad; his placid, passionless calm was slipping away from him.

"And now you must come right into the light," she said, and looked at him with eyes all sympathy, then at the crimson band that separated the black stripe and the yellow.

“What, and go through the fire again?” he seemed to read her every thought.

“It won’t harm you, it won’t indeed,” she sat up, earnest and eager. “You’ll pass easily through it right into the light.”

“Roma,” his voice was unsteady and he had lost control of it, “little girl, is it not too late for that?”

“Too late? Ah, no!” She was so sorry for him. “And once you are in the light, you will forget how dark it used to be.”

Her words crept as sunshine into his soul. With the promised light even now in his eyes, he looked towards the dimly purple range of the distant hills. A cloud of golden fleece broke loose from the deeper clouds that covered their crests, and as it drifted through the infinite blue, his soul seemed to rise from out of the shadows and soar towards a bright horizon.

CHAPTER XVIII

A GOLDEN SUNDAY

DOWN in the valley, in its setting of apple orchards, blushing rosy with innumerable blossoms, each adding its sweet savour to the scented breath of the spring-time, lies Hope Church, a beautiful thing from the hand of man dropped in the midst of one of God's loveliest creations. Fresh pasture-lands cropped by the deep-uddered kine, lose themselves in happy valleys, or climb the hill-slopes sweeping away to the westering sun till checked and bounded by thickets of trees in robes of earliest, freshest green. Away in the distance rise the Malvern Hills, and the far-off brooding Welsh mountains keeping perpetual guard, stable, immutable, among all that changes, inscrutable as fate, rooted in the dead past, watching in silence over the destiny of successive races of mankind. In the days that are very far off the White Friars tended with scrupulous care the narrow lane that led from the monastery above down to the little chapel below. Now only a few stones mark the site of the dwelling of the Holy Brothers, but the chapel raised by them still stands to the glory of God, though the form of worship has altered with the times.

It was many years since Vashon had walked that way, and the hedgerows that the Friars had kept so neatly were a tangle of woodbine and ivy trails, scarce allowing even occasional glimpses of the wild

hyacinths that swept like thin blue smoke up the meadow slopes on the other side. He was alone, but was well content with the companionship of the happy day-dream that he scarcely dared to weave, lest in the weaving it should escape him, and eyes grown used to the dimness in which his soul had taken refuge, blinked at the bright ray that flooded his being.

The sun had not yet sunk into the folds of its even-
ing shroud, and as its warm rays fell upon him, his thoughts revolved around another light that now lit up his life, for the ice-band that for years had bound it, melted as snow beneath sunshine; the harsh voices of the past had burst into melody, and this was the refrain of the song that they sang, "Once you are in the light you will quite forget how dark it used to be."

Afternoon service was being held within Hope Church, and the sound of voices reached him where he stood. The singing itself was crude and harsh, but very vigorous. Lusty tones and strong, went hard ahead. Clearer voices and sweeter chimed in as best they could, and the tremulous pipings of old age straggled in too late. But its passage through the sunlit air mellowed the music, and Vashon found nothing amiss with it, rather he rejoiced in it and drew nearer, for to-day all things seemed good to him.

Cautiously entering the porch, and opening the church door by an inch, he peeped inside and felt glad that no modern hand had dared destroy the old time interior. The Norman arch with its quaint beading of dog-tooth tracery yet spanned the chancel, and partly screened the Holy of Holies from the congregation, and the old oak sittings stood still and erect, as in the days when folk long since laid in the garden of sleep had gathered inside them.

He almost fancied he could see his uncle and aunt, who had worshipped at Hope during such time as their own parish church was undergoing repair, with Margaret and himself as children sitting on either side

of them, dressed in Sabbathical garments, grievous to them, that smelt, they declared, of Sunday, which day by reason of the rigid rules of the stern old Earl and his wife, was made hateful to them.

He was about to turn away when the rector's voice, penetrating, earnest and clear, spoke words that he dimly remembered had once before impressed him.

"Whither shall I go then from thy Spirit: or whither shall I go then from thy presence?"

They seemed particularly familiar to him. When and where had he last heard them?

"If I climb up into heaven, thou art there; if I go down into hell, thou art there also.

"If I take the wings of morning—"

"Ah!"

The wings of the morning! Printhorpe's picture.

He sat down on a moss-covered slab and memories crowded thickly upon him. He recalled the night in the studio when Printhorpe in that strange mood of exultation dashed with despair had drawn his brush across the ineffectual spirit-face that fell so far short of his ideal. How strange it all was. Here in the midst of scenes familiar to Neil from his boyhood his friend had found the ideal beauty that had floated before his inward vision. Soon he would transfer it in all its perfection to his canvas and Neil could almost find it in his heart to envy his task and the skill that fitted him for it. Could it be that a sweeter lot yet was reserved for him to keep those glorious dark eyes close to him, to bring happiness and gladness to them and teach the child life's lesson of love, while she taught him in return the simple joy of living.

He glanced around fearful lest the daring thought had passed from his keeping, but it was only the wind that sighing in the trees set rustling myriads of leaves. Then he looked with new eyes at the pleasant earth around him, burnished with a radiance that outshone the gold that is tried in the fire, for the

Great Refiner Himself had gilded it and there was glory, glory everywhere, and from the window there came the sound of singing.

“Where life and light and joy and peace,
In undivided empire reign,
And thronging angels never cease
The deathless strain.

“Where saints are clothed in spotless white,
And evening shadows never fall,
Where thou, Eternal Light of Light,
Art Lord of all.”

“Light of Light.” He seemed to find a strange pleasure in the repetition of these words, over and over again as he walked to the gate he repeated them.

A body of workmen in their work-a-day clothes attracted his attention; they were an unusual sight on a Sunday, and he watched them climb to the summit of the Glee Hill and disappear in a tunnel lately excavated to receive one of the huge pipes that were to channel the water from the Welsh hills to a distant smoke-begrimed city, then he followed them, and a workman explained the situation.

Some tons of soil had fallen in and blocked up the tunnel while one of their mates was at work in it, and he had been there since the beginning of the previous day. The tunnel was a long one and in all probability he would be alive unless the soil had fallen on him and crushed the life out of him. Gangs of them had been digging since daybreak, but as fast as they dug then loosened fresh soil, and so the rescue work was slow. The wife was like some crazy creature, added the man, and pointed to what looked like a huddled-up heap of clothes, for the woman, worn out, had fallen into a fitful sleep.

No, there was nothing he could do, the man told Vashon, he and his mates were working with a will, and when they slackened others were ready to come on. So

he left them, and the sound of the pickaxe, the clip of the spade, and the thud of the earth that it flung aside rang in his ears as he walked down the hillside towards home.

The night was a worthy survival of that sunlit day, that had lost itself in a bank of saffron and flames, and it was not till a pale proud moon swam into sight that the sky put on a domino of grey, powdered with silver and star-pricked. In the music room, where lights burned low, Margaret Craven played her strange unwritten compositions that now vexed the heart as they wailed with all the hunger of a soul unsatisfied, then soothed it with a sense of rest. Vashon apparently was reading but he forgot to turn over the pages of his book, and two heads, one red gold, the other fair as a boy's and curly, were bent over a portfolio. From time to time he glanced towards them. She had, he thought, not forgotten what he had said that morning, she was making amends to Stephen. Sweet, gracious little girl, how grieved she had been and how forgiving she had been towards him who had dared take her to task. But it would have been a pity had she kept up that uncalled for and unfriendly feeling.

How glad he was that he had been the means of softening her towards Stephen. Roma's laugh, so merry and musical, came over to him. Of course he was glad. Three consecutive times Vashon assured himself of this fact. A moth flashed through the candle flame, fell scorched and quivering, in mercy he crushed its maimed and useless life, and when its fellow would have followed suit, he set a glass above it and let it beat its foolish wings in safety against the side, scarcely understanding why it hurt him to see the needless suffering. Walking to the open window, he looked out into the transparent dust, and there the others joined him.

"What a moon!" exclaimed Stephen, "and what a night! What is it like?"

"Like any other moonlight night," laughed Vashon,

"but perhaps I'm wrong, for I'm no good at fine comparisons. I'm now wading through a book that compares the night to a sable shade, a black velvet mantle and a raven's wing, and the moon to a silver shilling and a cream curd. I, poor noodle, can't think of these things, I leave them to poets, authors and artists," he turned to Margaret, "fellows like Stephen in fact."

"Then you leave them in very good hands, for his ideas could never be ridiculous."

Vashon stared at her. He alone had heard her. There was nothing to be gathered in her words, but everything was revealed in the tone in which she had spoken them. A tone almost defiant, as though it dared him to speak lightly of his friend; yet so full was it of ardent admiration that it told its own story.

Margaret and Stephen! How altogether extraordinary! And yet was it so strange that those two should be attracted each to the other? "A clever woman," Stephen had called her. "Highly cultured, well read and a most delightful companion." And did not extremes meet, and characters apparently completely opposed find fellowship together. Margaret's reserve and stiffness, the result of an inborn shyness, would melt away under the influence of his buoyancy, his happy elastic high spirits. And he thought how he himself so dull, so grave and gloomy, had been gladdened by the companionship of a happy light hearted little girl, whose short lived tears so soon gave way to smiles, whose lips loved laughter. Then he ceased to harbour even such thoughts as these, for Roma was standing beside him.

Throughout that evening she had schooled herself to behave to Printhorpe with a natural ease of manner. Vashon's request had deeply impressed her, and she could not forgive herself for having brought his reproach upon her. At first it had seemed so difficult to speak composedly to the man she longed to avoid.

How she detested the part she was forced to play and him for having compelled her to play it, and most of all how deeply she despised herself. Then the tension broke and she had laughed and talked to him, and had forgotten the shadow that darkened her life, till a chance word spoken lightly and in all innocence, had filled her with a sickening dread that did not slacken till she stood beside Neil Vashon. She drew a deep breath of relief.

"What is that," he asked her, "a sigh?"

"It's not one of sorrow."

"Ah then, this evening you have been happy?"

Bending his head he looked at her and hung upon her answer.

"Talking to him, do you mean?" Unconsciously she frowned as she glanced towards Stephen, and Vashon's heart beat very fast. There was no need of further answer.

Madman and fool that he was! Had he almost feared the very thing that he had paved the way for, and forgotten all that Margaret had so unknowingly revealed to him? Margaret, at Stephen's request, had gone back to the organ, and he seemed to be absorbed in the music. Vashon glanced at him. Yes, there was Margaret and Stephen. How glad he was to think of the brightness in her grey life.

Opening the window he let fall the moonlight on the girl beside him. It played on her hair, it gleamed on her face and found abiding place in her glorious eyes.

"The light," he said hoarsely, hurriedly.

Half wondering she looked at him. She had forgotten.

"The Light," he urged. "Child, you promised it, and it's in the night, it's on your face, and oh, my heart is filled with it."

Roma remembered. His strange mood did not frighten her. She knew that he had known sorrow, and she did not seek for the cause that had lifted it.

Something she did not understand or pause to consider had made him happy. He had been so kind to her; his new found happiness made her glad.

"I told you it would come," she cried, and her gladness showed in her eyes, such dangerous eyes for a man to look into.

With iron will Vashon curbed the words he longed to say. He must have patience and not seek to add lustre to the soft light, lest he should frighten her. Time was before him. He thanked God for that. Thanked the Power that had rescued him from what, he had long since learned, must have led to misery. And he, in black ingratitude, had cursed the rescue work, and the hand that had served him. He turned his eyes towards the mighty, unexplored world above him, and asked forgiveness of the God he had well nigh forgotten. And Roma slipped away, unseen. He would wish to be alone with his new-born happiness, and her presence might jar him.

Vashon returned to his chair, took up the book he had made pretence to read, and caught sight of the moth he had saved from the flame. He watched its feeble flutterings from side to side, and as he studied its hopeless endeavours to scale the sides of its sheer glass prison, he suddenly called to mind the man in the Glee Hill tunnel, perhaps groping hopelessly, scaling the sides only to fall back baffled, rushing madly from side to side, peering vainly for a cranny in his coffin. The thought distracted him. It would not be set aside. While he was in the warmth and light, and exceeding comfort, a fellow creature was in an agony of dread despair. The sound of pickaxe, the clip of the spade, and dull thud of earth now rang in his ears, distinct and clear. There was no need to disturb the others, to tell them of the horror. How could he have forgotten it!

A moment later he hurried down the drive, and the moth, let loose, fluttered away in safety.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE SWORD OF PAIN

THE spell of the night was over the earth. The strange spell that gives to squalid streets an air of Eastern mystery and unreality, and a look of peace and plenty to wind-swept plains, that in the daytime speak only of desolation. Under the magician's wand of moonlight the tangled path that led from Hope Church to Glee Hill lay stretched as a shimmering band of steel, shadows, like the wraiths of the White Friars haunting their well-known walk, quivered across it, and Neil Vashon's footsteps, treading it hurriedly, sounded crisp and clear in the silence.

With startling distinctness a woman's shriek pierced the quiet night. His footsteps quickened, and soon the clink of pick and thud of spade told him that the rescue work went on apace. The workmen looked up as he came into sight, and a woman ran forward to meet him. She stared at him dully till breaking into a paroxysm of foolish laughter she darted back to the tunnel and tore with both hands at the earth which blocked it. Heart-sick and sorry, he would have spoken to her, when one of the men checked him, for neither they, nor a group of panic-stricken women dared to touch her. Then when she flung high a handful of earth, and smiling vacuously sought to collect it, and add its might to the great weight that had fallen, Vashon understood that the hideous mystery of madness had fallen upon her.

He bared his throat and pulling off his coat seized a spade, and the men ceased their labour to look at him. With almost superhuman strength and speed he flung

the soil aside, the sinews of his arms standing out like iron bands, put even theirs to shame, and yet they in the sweat of their brow had laboured all their lives.

The light weaving silver tones through the shadows revealed men's faces rugged and stern with earnest purpose, and the poor vacant face of the woman who laughed, and sang, and shrieked by turns, as unceasingly she scratched away the earth, picked it up, and patted it back again.

"She was one of the quiet decent sort, before this trouble drove her daft," said the man who laboured beside Vashon; "kept to herself, minded her home and had always a good word for her husband. Maybe the sight of him alive and uninjured would give her back her gumption, otherwise he'd be better off dead, for he'd thought a deal of her. Lor! what was she up to now!" Laughing softly to herself the woman lifted a weight of slate, that she dragged towards the tunnel and propped it against the soil that choked the passage: "Twill keep him snug and safe inside," she said in a voice of utmost cunning and hurried to a yet bigger slab of slate. She began to whimper, then creeping towards Vashon she looked up at him with pitiful eyes like those of a dog that had been unjustly beaten. The shadow of a great fear fell over her face, and she stared with terror at the tunnel. When the delicate machinery of the poor brain is thrown out of gear, the heart no longer beats true. All its wealth of love is changed to strength in hating: where it worshipped, it now blasphemes, where it adored, it cringes; where it trusted with a perfect faith, it now fears with abject terror. So in this demented woman, her whole nature was warped from its bias.

"Keep him in," she whispered with breathless rapidity and drew out her handkerchief in the corner of which she had secreted the wages her man had never failed to bring home to her. "He'll rob me of it, keep him in, don't let him out."

With nerveless shaking fingers she thrust her money out of sight. To reason with her shattered intellect were waste of time. To argue with her would be to add fuel to the flame that consumed her.

"That's right, you keep it safe," said Vashon reassuringly. He took her poor earth-stained hand, its finger nails bruised and bleeding. "You come along and rest awhile." She looked at him suspiciously and at his next words she burst into mindless mirth. "We will shut him up all right if you'll keep quiet, come here and I'll hide you where he'll never find you."

The thought pleased her. Docile as a child she let him lead her; at his bidding, she lay down upon the ground; he covered her over with his coat, and in a moment she slept soundly. Setting a man to watch her, Vashon hastened back to his labour.

None spoke and Vashon worked with dogged will, never pausing to rest, for he felt no need of it; he was racing neck to neck with death. Death should not win if he could outpace it, and time throbbed on till the night in slow majesty swept towards the west, and the greyness that heralds the dawning of day crept out spectre thin and pale from the east. The heavy weight of soil was almost cleared away. One of the workmen shouted, and took an oath that the man entombed had answered him. His fellows scoffed; there was yet a wall between their mate and them. Again the man shouted, others added lusty voices and all vowed they had received a muffled reply. They dug and delved with hope renewed and hearts that beat high, then turned away, and the strongest man among them shuddered and sickened at the sight of a rigid arm and a hand clenched tight, stuck upright out of the earth. Slowly—there was now no need for speed—they scraped off the soil that had crushed the dead man down, and carefully as though their burden were a fragile thing and precious, they bore it away. Some hours ago he had been one of themselves, a rough and tumble

sort of fellow, now he was a mystery, a something to be respected and feared. The woman, roused from sleep, stared at him with eyes vacant as his own. Mindless, heart misery was robbed of all power to hurt her. An immoveable curtain had fallen on her life's drama for ever.

Night shadows had fled when Vashon walked down the tangled path, slowly, towards home, and things let loose from the spell of night, stirred themselves, flung aside their languor and prepared to greet the light. Between the passing of night and the dawn of day there is a troubled breath that blows from some strange and unknown chill, it fanned Vashon's face as it passed him swiftly by. He stood still and it seemed to him as though the night-shadows had slanted suddenly across the sky, veiling the coming day and, reflecting them, his eyes grew dim. With a vague anxiety he pressed his hand against them, then looked about him with a mute entreaty, fearful as a child whose heart is laden with evil undefined forebodings. The darkness deepened, suddenly, remorselessly it thickly enfolded him. The horrible sensation suffocated him, it was as though an iron band held fast his throat, robbed him of his breath and blinded him. Silently he fought against the confused trouble that surged within him, but his power of resistance was paralyzed; then he set tight his teeth lest the mortal agony that now pierced him should compel him to cry aloud at the cruel stabbing thrust that so mercilessly stabbed him. Seven times it stabbed him before the sword of pain was sheathed.

There was a broad band of tender light in the sky that soon flushed crimson, the sun was coming, and the clouds his courtiers decked themselves in bright raiment for the coming of their king. The morning wind played lightly with the leaves, it dried up the pearl ropes strung of dew drops, that were festooned from blade to briar, and the world was wide awake.

The birds had been the first to rouse themselves.

Even the greyness of dawn had not depressed them, the bright promise of day delighted them, and altogether they sang their best. One, a blackbird, bolder than the others perched on a sprig that almost touched a dark head lying low, and warbled delicious daylight notes into ears that could not hear them. Frightened it flew away.

Neil Vashon groped with feeble hands. Slowly he raised himself, wrestled with his weakness, and sought to see through the dense mist that hung before him. He was so cold it might have been mid-winter; he drew his hands together and sought to rub them.

The sun-king burst through the crimson and let fall some rays from his golden crown. Their kindly comfort fell upon Vashon, the dread darkness disappeared, the mist cleared away, revealed the world bright with sunlight and he stood up once more, a magnificent embodiment of proud and splendid manhood; then with hurried footsteps he set off towards home.

Some hours later he and Printhorpe talked together. On Vashon's face there was no trace of the Gethsemane he had passed through. Printhorpe was by far the more disturbed of the two, for Neil had sprung upon him the startling statement that he was returning to Town that very day.

It would be selfish, thought Vashon, to confide in him the reason for this sudden decision, knowing that were he to do so, no earthly consideration would deter him from coming with him. Hints of a lurking evil had come to Vashon frequently before, but none of a sufficient force to put him on his guard; they had been quickly forgotten, and he had scorned Printhorpe's earnest advice to put himself in the hands of a doctor; now that he was about to adopt his advice, he decided to say nothing about it. Of course, there was nothing much amiss, certainly nothing that could not be set right, he felt half inclined to scoff at his decision, but

the agony had been bad to bear; his face changed at the mere thought of it. Anyway he would keep his own counsel, Margaret and Stephen seemed so content to be together, absurd to needlessly disturb and disquiet them.

"Don't look so glum, Dolly. By the way, before I go I'll have a talk with Miss Vella, I'll ask her straight out if she'll sit to you for that picture."

"As well ask the sun to give over setting. But Neil, I can never be grateful enough to you for bringing me here, and in consequence, perhaps I need not quite despair."

Drawing his note book from his pocket he handed it to Vashon. In it were sketches of Roma full face and profile. Her head turned to the right, the left, looking over her shoulder. Roma pensive, with eyes full of a medley of thought, Roma laughing, the wind playing games with her hair.

"Dolly, they are lovely, because they are all like her, but in each there is something lacking. Would it help you if I got her consent to sit to you?"

"Help me! why ask it. But," he shook his head, "Neil, have you definitely decided that we leave this very day?"

"I did not include you in the flight. You'll stay where you are. There is no reason you shouldn't, and every reason you should." He smiled; for Stephen's face was eager, even as he repudiated the possibility.

"How could I unless you were here. What on earth would Lady Margaret think?"

"Here she comes, so we'll soon know." Vashon gave a little laugh. It promised to be amusing.

In a few words he gave his cousin a tangible reason for his decision. The plea of business was very elastic. Well used to his restless moods, Margaret expressed no surprise, only much regret, and he knew instinctively that all her thought had gone over to Stephen, that her lips longed to say the thing her eyes were speaking.

Turning aside he left them together, and felt no hurt at the knowledge that her affection for him, that spanned a long stretch of years, was a small thing scarcely to be considered, when placed beside a deeper feeling born but a few days before.

Margaret took a long breath before she spoke. In her struggle to keep her voice from being over urgent she robbed it of all trace of interest, and spoke with careless indifference.

"As Neil's business does not concern you, perhaps you will stay here till he comes back again."

Stephen was silent. She invited him out of commonplace politeness. How vexed she would be if he accepted her invitation. She sought to swallow down the sickening sense of disappointment. Of course the very idea had bored him.

"Perhaps some day we shall have the pleasure of seeing you here again." She turned her head away.

"May I come back?" he cried so eagerly that she looked up, startled and glad, and her voice was in tune with her heart's desire.

"Any day, any hour, there will be a welcome for you always."

She seemed to mean each word she had said. What would he not give to stay.

"Neil," he ventured, "may return before the week is over, he might even come back to-morrow."

"In which case why should you take a tiresome journey for so short a time. If the idea is not too dull, won't you stay till his return?"

"That is indeed a generous invitation for one who knows his ways. He's so uncertain he might be away for weeks."

"And you would want to get back to your work." She hesitated, what she was now going to say seemed hard. But if it would keep him near her. And how despicable of her to grudge the praise due to the beautiful young thing he had scarcely noticed. "Mr. Prin-

thorpe, Neil told me something of your disappointment in your picture, that your model did not please you. My cousin Roma Vella is beautiful, and if it pleased you she would sit to you and here, at all events, you would have a quiet time for work and no distractions."

Again were his blue eyes lit with the light that she had seen in them in the first hour of their meeting, when sitting together in the picture gallery she had foretold good things for him, even before with heart-felt pleasure he thanked her. Then unthinkingly he said some words for which he was afterwards sorry.

"The place and the beauty of these surroundings would help me more than I can say. And Miss Vella as a model, ah, that would indeed satisfy me, but, Lady Margaret, she would never consent."

Margaret's lips tightened, the autocratic sternness of her race swept over her face.

"Her consent need not be asked. As a girl I submitted to the authority of my elders, and I expect the same from her."

Printhorpe felt furious at his own short-sightedness. What a fool he had been not to leave that matter in the hands of Vashon.

"Lady Margaret, without Miss Vella's consent I could not, would not."

She checked him with a little imperious uplifting of her hand.

"Your anxiety is quite needless. Roma is a good submissive girl. Besides, why conclude that she would have any objection?"

But he could only be silent, and Margaret in a maze of content bade him come and choose the room best suited to his work.

CHAPTER XX

VASHON'S DIPLOMACY

NOT hanging back or hesitating, or turning aside as was so often her wont when she met him, Roma Vella walked straight towards Stephen Printhorpe. She carried high her head, her face, strained from its soft curves, was white and set, and her voice, though the rebel blood worked riot, was hard and measured.

"Lady Margaret has told me that I may be of some use to your picture, and she has bidden me tell you that I will sit to you." In profound dismay Printhorpe stared at her. She went on again, her scarcely controlled, unreasoning anger waxing greater, "I am bound to obey her."

"Even if you hate the thing she desires," he interrupted hotly.

"Even if I hate it as much as I hate this."

He did not deserve such treatment at her hands. His own blood was up. His own eyes flashed anger.

"Miss Vella, it is quite useless for you to disturb yourself. I'd rather never paint another stroke, never as long as I live touch a brush than paint you against your will."

With hot hearts and angry eyes they faced each other. Then turned and went on their separate ways.

"There is a curse on that picture," thought Printhorpe furiously, disappointment and vexation of spirit had followed him ever since he had begun it. He

would destroy it, cut the canvas, and throw away the silver coin, let it blacken and rust like his own ambition. He drew it out, hesitated, stared at it moodily, ran straight into a holly tree, and started back as Vashon laughed at him. Then seeing Printhorpe's face he grew grave.

"I'm a poor sort of diplomatist," said Vashon when he had listened to Printhorpe, "the poorest I should say, but I'll do my best."

"Do nothing at all." Hurt and angry Stephen spoke almost roughly. "There is nothing to be done," he added moodily, miserably. "You can't make the girl willing to sit, though she may yield under compulsion. I will *not* paint her against her will."

But apparently Vashon had not heard him.

"Yes, I'll do my best, though the whole thing beats me. It seems to me that everyone has made a mess of things all around, and yet there is no one to blame. Come back to Town with me? Stuff and nonsense, man, you can't do that, having accepted Margaret's invitation to stop on, you can't treat her in that casual fashion. But I can't go away and leave you all at sixes and sevens. Dolly, you wait here and perhaps by the time you have smoked a couple of pipes, I'll have settled something."

They had walked together till they reached the chestnut wood: there, Vashon turned and leaving Stephen more morose, more out of conceit with the world and out of tune with himself than ever he had yet felt he sought the path that led to the river. He had learnt Roma's favourite haunts, and found her sitting disconsolate and alone by the bank.

She turned her head as she heard him coming, then turned it aside, not in pride and anger, but shamefaced and penitent now that it was all too late.

It was cruel to distress her, he thought; aloud he bade her look up, and stooping he gently drew from her hand the stick with which she traced imaginary

circles on the ground, then when he entreated her to speak to him, she shook her head and remained silent. He was not going to vex her, no, not even for Stephen.

"Ah child, forgive me, and I won't say another word. I'll go away now, as it is in less than an hour I must leave, but as Stephen has told me—" There was no need for further word.

"He has told you?" with great frightened eyes she looked up at him. "Then you know?"

"Yes, and I know that I have left him miserable. I know everything except what passed between you and Margaret."

"It passed in a moment," she said with a tight sob, and he felt he almost hated those who had hurt her. "In a moment. She called me to her and told me that she wished me to sit to him for his picture, and I said I should hate it. And then the look that came into her face frightened me, and I hurried away lest I should see it again, and then I met him and—"

"Hush child, have I not told you that I know."

He took her hand and neither seemed to think it strange. Each heart was full of widely different thoughts and feelings.

Suddenly upon her fell a great longing to tell him everything. Tell him all the sadness of her life, those shameful moments by the river when she had sung for bread. Then ask him how could she sit hour after hour to be painted into this picture, the scene of her shame vivid before her, the memory of the past about her, and the stain of the lie she had told upon her lips. Yes, she would tell him everything, hiding nothing. But oh, how hard the telling would be.

So hard was it that Vashon, who had been torn between loyalty to his friend's cause, and a dread of distressing her, was the first to break the silence and to tell her Stephen Printhorpe's story.

"Listen, little girl, I want to tell you something. It

will take but a few moments in the telling, though it covers months of his life. A true artist's life you know is wrapped up in his work. Stephen conceived the idea of this picture, the conception was magnificent, and he lived on the heights of his imagination pursued by a vision of ideal beauty for his spirit face. By constantly dwelling upon it, it became a real thing to him, a haunting personality. One can easily understand how such a thing can be. But it escaped his brush. What he saw in his inner vision remained an abstraction. I, who saw his angel on the canvas, thought her beautiful, he, like Narcissus, in love with his own ideal, was filled with a divine discontent and unrest.

"(One wild winter's night he went down to the Embankment where the scene of his picture was laid; and from that night onward he raved about some little street-singer with the face of his vision." Roma moved away into the shade. "He lost her at once, she slipped away into the shadow leaving him wild to find her again. He never did find her; weeks afterwards he gave up the search in despair and came down here with me. Well, child, he saw you. Who can wonder that your face realised his hopes and he vowed it was the same that had haunted him in dreams. I'm dearly fond of Stephen, otherwise I'd have lost all patience with his extravagance, also I thought the thing had got so on his brain and nerves it was useless to reason with him. And now, now that I have told you this, if you could try and subdue your strange dislike to him—I know I'm daring a great deal, but I should so hate him to be disappointed and if you would gratify him it would be the making of him and of his whole career. He worships his work. It is all the world to him. If you refuse I honestly think he will never do another stroke. But if you still dislike it so much, there's an end of it, for he would never paint you against your wish. I have not a little influence with Margaret, and he has lost all hope of your consenting."

In silence the moments that were so precious to him slipped by, and he had spent them in pleading the cause of another.

"Must you go?"

She turned her face towards him. Her cry, so like a cry of pain, rang in his ears, in his heart. She wished him to stay. Oh! life was good and glad. A quick catch of his breath. Just one sharp stab, that coming from an unseen enemy stamped his face with the dull look of lead and warned him he must leave. In a little while he would come back again, surely in a very little while, though the hours away from her would lag on lamest feet. But Roma's hesitation fled as she looked at him.

"I'll do it. I'll do anything. He shall paint me into his picture. I'll sit for him as long as ever he likes. Why, your face has turned so white. I did not understand that it meant so much to you. Hark! Cousin Margaret calls, and till you have spoken to her, I am afraid to meet her. But remember, I have promised, promised faithfully."

"God bless you, little girl, there is nothing for you to fear." With iron control he lifted his head, her beautiful face was perilously near. He paused, the difficulty was not to speak, it was harder far to be silent. Margaret's call came clearer. It was too late. Whatever might have been said, it was too late to say it. "Roma, go now, go home and go through the chestnut wood."

He watched the last glimpse of her dress, the last gleam of her hair, and knew he had sent her to Stephen.

But Roma did not glance behind her. Her mind was in a whirl, and thoughts crowded in fast and thick upon her. She walked on through the chestnut wood, then stood still and wondered, would Vashon join her? Perhaps Margaret had kept him, perhaps she was unforgiving. A weary look passed over her face. She

moved on again and came face to face with Stephen Printhorpe.

Again they stood and looked at one another. He with wounded feeling, resentment traced on each line of his face, and a steely indifference to her presence in his eyes. She with troubled eyes, and head bent down as a beautiful broken flower. Lifting it suddenly, she braced her heart and in all honesty and with no bitterness her words broke from her.

"I am so sorry. I should never have spoken as I did, and if you can forget what I said, please let me be of use to your picture."

Never had she seemed more lovely. Her dark uplifted eyes all dewy, the turmoil in her breast flushing her face with a carmine that quickly paled and came back again. He was tongue-tied and cursed his inability to answer her. Then at length the power of speech came back to him.

"You mean it?" he cried. She shrank a little from the intensity of his eyes, for he had forgotten all but the thought that his heart's desire had come to him. "At last I shall be satisfied." He drew a long, deep breath, then schooled himself. "Miss Vella, has Neil told you?" He checked himself. Fool, again he was treading on quicksand.

She turned away, dumb, half-frightened at the thought that now came to her. Should she tell him all, and fling aside the last thread of deception? It was a daring, a desperate thought. Little did she know that Printhorpe had read it, and was filled with anxiety lest she should betray herself. Her secret was her own; he had no right to probe it. He was to blame; his was the fault not hers; she was blameless. In this new revulsion of feeling he dreaded only that she would reveal all she had hidden. With ready tact he saved the situation as in earnest tones and heartfelt gratitude he thanked her. He even touched on his hopes, his fears and disappointments, without causing

her to wince, glancing cautiously over each sensitive point without paining her, and when he had finished, leaving her fully convinced that she had nothing to fear, that not even dimly had he divined her secret. The reverence of his manner, his quiet even voice soothed her, and side by side they walked together, harmony and confidence weaving between them a delicate silken web.

Printhorpe was the first to hear the sound of wheels.

"'Tis Neil, he's gone, and we forgot him!"

"Gone! and we forgot him," she echoed in distress.

She ran swiftly to the edge of the wood.

"Come back soon, soon," she called with all the strength of her strong young lungs.

"Soon, soon," the echo of the words alone reached Vashon. For a moment he drew rein and looked wistfully about him. Then the mare, fretting at her check, drew him swiftly out of sight.

CHAPTER XXI

THE WHEELS OF GREAT JUGGERNAUT'S CAR

It was Derby week. The season was in full swing, and this morning Bond Street was blocked with men in society's livery, and smart women who brushed the street sweepings with their skirts. Each mind might be its own prison-house and hold its own secret captive, but the day was balmy; there was a sense of physical enjoyment for all alike; nearly all were idle and had sallied forth on no business real or imagined, but merely to see and to be seen. Carriages had come to a temporary stand-still, and Mrs. Seligman, sitting at ease in hers, imperturbable and apparently indifferent to everything and every one, was well content to scan the crowd and let it scan her. Then suddenly she started as if shot, jumped to her feet, and the next minute, blind to all risk of being run over, she was making for the pavement. Reaching it in safety she dexterously threaded her way till she stood beside Neil Vashon.

"Neil, I've risked my neck and every bone in my body to reach you."

He greeted her composedly and seemed quite content to see her. No thought of past recriminations showed in his face and for all the traces it had left the scene they had enacted at their last meeting might never have taken place.

"Come out of this crowd," she said, "we'll turn down Half Moon Street; this is like Bedlam let loose."

He hesitated, but she had made her way ahead of him, and he followed her into the less thronged street. Then she looked up at him and saw something that perplexed her.

"Neil, what have you been doing?"

"I have been to Hill's to get my hair cut; it would not have disgraced the Poet Laureate."

"No, no, not that, what else? Somehow you look different."

He laughed lightly.

"It's the collar, it's a different shape, or could it be my hat?"

"How you tease," she said impatiently.

He apologised and bent on her the eyes she so well remembered, glad contented eyes, and her heart failed with jealous fear.

"You look as you used to look long ago," she faltered. Then suddenly, "Neil, I have news for you, not that it will interest you. I am going to be married to Count de Cosimo almost immediately."

She looked at him hungrily. Would he throw her a crumb? But there was no need for her to complain of lack of interest.

"Is it for your happiness?" he asked her.

"It was for the satisfaction of her dressmaker and the other sharks that had got their teeth into her. It was the only way of shaking them off," she thought, and did not answer.

Again he looked at her. Seeing the tell-tale lines that the cunning coating of fine enamel could not altogether hide, the artificial tinting that coloured her hair, the hints of the inevitable wreck and ruin of the years coming surely, steadily upon the woman who would always set time at defiance. All the old links were long ago snapped between them; pity alone kept back repulsion; but it troubled him to think of the hideous future that she had mapped out for herself, and he asked her the question again.

"My happiness?" she echoed with scarcely smothered passion, "that is in the hollow of one hand."

She waited for the answer that never came, then threw back her head and gave a laugh that jarred.

"Is it for my happiness you ask me? Why certainly. De Cosimo is a delightful companion, with endless experiences. He has travelled all over the world and has been kicked out of more places than he would care to count. He tells lies as fast as a cook shells peas, and it's most exciting circumventing him. Oh, yes. I shall be happy as the day is long."

"That reminds me," he said, "that the morning is short and I have many things to do."

He looked round for her carriage which had followed her, waited for her to get into it and bid her good-bye.

"Good-bye, Neil, I congratulate you on the way your hair has been cut, also on the collar." Another laugh that did not ring true. "You are looking years younger and infinitely happier."

Dismissing all thought of her, Vashon glanced at the memoranda he had pencilled on his shirt cuff.

Hair cut, that was done. *Brook Street*, he looked at his watch, it yet wanted half-an-hour to the appointment he had made there. *Tattersall's*—He would bid for the chestnut cobs being sold there that day.⁶ Then to Paddington, and the four o'clock train would bring him back to Roma.

"Back to Roma," he repeated it, as he turned his footsteps towards the park and took a chair beside the Achilles statue, and there gave himself up to the luxury of happy imagination. Away from the girl who held his heart, out of hearing of her voice, far beyond all sight of her, his hopes had risen in leaps and bounds, and in this there was nothing strange.

It is the way of these aerial structures that rest on slight foundations. Unchecked by the restraining contact with reality, they rise and soar aloft until the very builder forgets the ephemeral nature of their con-

struction, and lives a mortal in the house of his imagination until one day it melts about him at the first cold touch of common sense. Thus it was that Vashon in his solitude found it easy enough to build a structure that grew to a pinnacle of perfection.

He felt at peace with himself and wished the whole world well. He greeted cheerily those who stopped to speak to him, and many who did not know him took note of the magnificent physique of the man.

The sun was blazing full upon the flower-beds; they studded the grass bright as jewels, and he wondered as he passed them by that their beauty had never impressed him before. The wheels of a carriage deposited an ugly fleck upon his cuff, that, even, did not annoy him. A tiny child upset the contents of a lilliputian perambulator at his feet; stooping he picked up and replaced the waxen dollies, and the child's mother followed him out of sight with her eyes, and thought that a great good heart beat within that powerful body.

Time was up and Vashon strode down Brook Street feeling shamefaced at his folly. He had taken a hysterical view of things. The doctor would dismiss him with a laugh, perhaps a prescription for a tonic, think him a fool, and not be far wrong.

Standing on the great man's doorstep he hesitated. Should he turn away and not betray himself as a hypochondriacal bundle of nervous fears. The door opened and as a man passed out Vashon passed in. His glance at the man's face drew out his deepest sympathy. He had looked stunned, stricken as from a sudden shock. Surely he had heard his doom. Poor fellow, how hard it seemed! Possibly life held for him some great happiness.

The look stamped upon that face so impressed him that he could not help alluding to it when he found himself in the presence of the doctor, who guffawed as he answered,

"Hopeless case! not a bit of it. The fellow is as fit

as a fiddle, but my advice has depressed him. I've told him to knock off port, to limit his allowance of spirits, and to get to bed before daylight. He burns the candle at both ends, and can't understand that there's a limit to the wick."

"He'll think fools a drug in the market this morning," thought Vashon and wished more than ever he had kept away. He had bared his broad chest, strong as a plank, and powerful, and the silence in the room lasted long.

"The pain while it lasted was bad," he said apologetically and wished the man would put down the tube he held against him.

There was no change on the doctor's face as he looked at him, nothing to be learned from his commonplace question.

"Have you had any specially violent exertion of late?"

"Not that I'm aware of, unless digging a ton of earth off a man would come under that head. Poor chap, when we did get to him he was dead."

"Humph! how long ago was that?"

"A couple of nights ago. I may have given myself a bit of a strain. I never thought of that."

"When did you last see a doctor?"

"That," laughed Vashon, "requires thought. Let me see. Ah, I remember. The Woolwich cadets were playing Sandhurst. I was fielding and I stopped a cricket ball with my head, and got knocked out of time. Why it's twenty years ago since a doctor overhauled me."

The next question was more astounding.

"Your people,—are they in town?"

"My people,—what on earth do you mean?"

"I should be glad of a talk with one of them."

"I'm afraid I can't manage that. I haven't a near relation in the world: but why not tell me anything there may be to say. It won't trouble me."

Silence, and Vashon who was pulling on his coat turned round and stared.

"There's nothing wrong?" he said.

"There's nothing right."

"But, of course, you can tinker me up, and even if you can't, I can bear the pain; after all it can't kill."

"You big men," said the doctor thoughtfully, "are often not as strong as the smaller ones. Your hearts have too much work to do, they get fagged out pumping the blood through your bodies. In your case you must always have had a tendency to this evil and you have evidently seriously accentuated it. By your late over-exertion, you have done yourself irretrievable harm."

"Speak out, man; I'm not the fellow to funk a thing."

The doctor cleared his throat. He was used to his trade. Scores of times he had given the verdict, but now somehow, it seemed to come harder. Then he gave it, cautiously as he could for safety sake.

"You asked for the truth. I'd sooner have told it to a friend or relative, but after all it would have come to the same thing. *Angina Pectoris* can never be cured, but with extraordinary care life may be prolonged, and your only chance is utmost care and caution; in fact, you must lead an invalid's life."

"And if I do, if I live like a torpid fly, how long can I hang out. Till the next attack of pain comes?"

The doctor bent his head.

"And it might come any time? Forgive me for badgering about it, but I may as well know exactly where I am."

"Failing extraordinary precaution, any time. Any day, any week. I should say in a month at most."

"Thank you," said Vashon quietly and proceeded to arrange his tie with the utmost care, pulling out the loops on a level with each end.

Afterwards the doctor thought he had never seen a man take a thing so well.

The dissipated little peer had turned green on hearing he must dock his drink. A gouty patient had grumbled hard that morning on being told he must take his toes to Aix and keep them there; this man had not turned a hair. "I would not give a sixpence for his chance of seeing sunrise," he added, then forgot him.

Vashon stepped into the sunshine and shivered. Something seemed to be wrong with the day. He stood undecided which way he should turn. A hansom pulled up before him; he got into it, scarcely knowing he had done so.

The man waited, then asked: "Where to?"

"Where to? Anywhere. Stay. Hold hard."

Was his brain astray? He had forgotten where he was going to. There were several things he had meant to do. Ah, Tattersall's, that was one. He gave the order, and wondered at the sudden weight that had fallen across his understanding. He pressed his hand tightly against his forehead: There was a horrid singing sound in his head.

On Tattersall's steps a man he knew stopped to speak to him.

"Knocking round, or going to bid?"

"I don't know," he said slowly. "Any day, any week, in a month at most." Then he laughed, and the man stared, the laugh was unlike any he had ever heard before.

"There are a couple of clinkin' chestnut cobs going," he said, and being on business bent passed on.

"Chestnut cobs." Why, of course, he had come to bid for them. He hurried on, the bidding had begun. Then the power to think came back again. No one short of a madman would buy horses for a month,—a month at most—not if the best of them ever foaled came under the hammer.

A moment's reflection with ice-cold hands and heart on fire—then he turned towards Piccadilly—with faltering steps at first, that soon grew strong again.

The day had throbbed^d itself away, and darkness reigned in the room where Vashon had sat since noon. Darkness without, darkness within. Black Stygian night more sombre in his heart than that over earth and sky. Thinking and again thinking, with hammers beating the words in upon his brain. "A month at most." That was the dead wall against which he was brought up short and sharp whenever his brain began to work in the ordinary channels. It set an inexorable limit to everything, and every hour that sounded struck away an appreciable portion of the time that yet remained to him. *At most a month.* He lived through years of thinking between noon and night, and yet *cui bono*? His mind worked up to that wall, but never beyond it. Sometimes he resolved to put it away altogether, that all should be as it was before these words set "finis" across his life. He would not heed the fiat, he would go back to the one peaceful place that yet remained though all things seemed slipping away from him. Then, with the instinct of the wounded animal, bearing in its breast the mortal injury, he would resolve to creep away and hide from every eye, even from those that loved him, lest the shadow that was darkening his life should fall across theirs.

Poor fool! His dream had been short lived. All the time he had lingered in the sunshine, till a ray of it had fallen across his heart, he had been a man foredoomed to death, had he but known it. The spring flowers had never seemed so sweet—he had looked his last upon the springtide. The race and rush of the tide of life was over, it was ebbing now, leaving him heavy and apathetic. Poor dreamer of dreams! "Out of darkness, through fire into night." That was the reading of the motto for him. All the light he had known was the glow of the furnace of affliction.

The child would be sorry, would miss him a little, but she would turn to her toys again ere the tears dried in her sweet compassionate eyes. And he had

hoped to win her to himself for ever! He with his embittered useless life, and hair prematurely grey. So much for his presumption. Well, he was paid, overpaid, and the balance was his against the world. Death! when he felt life throbbing through every pulse. He set his teeth hard, he felt trapped.

"Bushed," he whispered hoarsely. "Bushed, and there is no way out of it."

His head fell forward into his hands as he lived again through a time when, lost in the ghostly solitude of an Australian forest, a lagging death had stared him in the face, for few, once bushed, work their way out. Clearly, as if yesterday he remembered the desolation of that time, alone with the weird wild life that belonged to that land. The kangaroos leaping with silent feet. The strange birds shrieking like evil beings; then, harder far to bear, the awful significant silence. Seeking a way of escape he had paced through nights of tropical moonlight when the southern cross had hung from the ether sky, and the creeper-tangled groves and gum-trees shone silver. Through days of scorching heat, parched with thirst and famished, till at last, too weak to stand, he had crawled on hands and knees, dragging his swollen feet, painfully, very slowly, only to find himself back again beside the bleached skeleton of horse and man, victims the Bush had vanquished, the grim starting point from which he had first set out. And he thought of his unspeakable joy, his almost overwhelming relief when, after a final feverish search, he had found the right track, all the time close at hand, which brought him out of the deadly solitude of the Bush back into the world of men, from death to life.

But now. Now he was "Bushed," and he would find no way of escape from the vague gigantic space. Bushed! hustled with each moment of time towards the end of all things.

In this hour of mortal weakness he set himself to

probe the mystery of life,¹ and savage as an untamed beast, he bit his lip till the blood flowed fast. To what purpose was he born to be tricked, deceived, tormented, to have the gate of happiness slammed to in his face, his hopes trailed in the dust, the gloom of Golgotha, and the relentless on-coming wheels of the great Juggernaut's car of destiny, reserved for all humanity, at the last. Any time these last few years he had set his life on the hazard of a throw, he had cared naught for it. It was valueless, the world bored him, he had faced death in many forms. But now! just when he cared to live, just when life had grown golden with hope, and happiness seemed within reach, now he was called on to meet death, and the end of it all.

Then stumbling at every step of the way, sinking deeper into a shoreless sea with no guiding hand to help him, he tried to probe the mystery of death. He passed his hand over the mighty muscles of his arm, over his Goliath-like limbs, that must soon shrivel and be as dry dust, his heart beats stop as the ticking of a clock run down. And after death, what then? For that question he had no answer. Nor did he seek, or feel the smallest desire to find one. He could not, would not think of such things. He moved his head impatiently. After death, what then? Nothing. What other reply could he find for such a riddle? But the riddle worked like madness in his mind and with passionate impatience he let fall his clenched fist upon the table.

"Nothing."

He hissed the word between his teeth. Once he shouted it aloud as if in angry contradiction of an inner voice that answered: "God."

Like some strange new secret the word reverberated through his whole being again and again. "God." Now with fierce insistence, then with a soft pleading, but with a great finality he could not escape. It filled him with unrest; he must get away from it.

He stood up, for the word seemed to creep out of each cranny and corner of the room. Groping his way through the gathering darkening, to the door, he stood irresolute in the passage. Then he turned towards the studio, and there for the first time he thought of Printhorpe.

How shocked he would be. Yes, shocked, that was the word, and he and Margaret would talk of him in the half hushed voice that the living think reverent towards the dead. And death, which lends its victims a spurious sanctity that in life they could never claim, that gilds the common-place, extenuates short-comings, that whitewashes sinners, till they are almost on a level with saints, would speedily shed its lustre over him, and they would forget all that was amiss, and exaggerate and make much of the little in him that they found to praise.

Dear Dolly. But he would honestly miss him. He would never forget him and he would always remember that he had led him to his realised ideal.

A heavy sigh swept through the studio, and turning his head Vashon looked at the place where once the picture stood; only that morning he had sent it to Printhorpe. He saw it all so clearly. The creeping river, the city still shrouded in darkness; the faint far gleam of coming day, the crouching figure hiding itself from the Angel of the Presence.

"Whither shall I go then from thy Spirit: or whither shall I go then from thy presence?"

The words rang through his mind with a startling clearness. It was just what he himself was doing.

Again the one word "God" stood out in letters of flame. And after—what then? And again the answer "God."

"If I climb into heaven thou art there: If I go down to hell—"

Pshaw! He was growing nervous. Furious with himself, he turned hastily and left the studio, slamming the door behind him.

The next moment he had crossed the street, and the torturing, maddening question ceased tormenting.

CHAPTER XXII

DERBY DAY

THE club was crowded, and Vashon, instead of taking up a paper and carrying it off to a chair well apart from his fellows as was his wont, joined a group of men who were discussing the Derby prospects.

A couple of them turned and nodded, then continued their absorbing talk. He had never been one of themselves, had never mixed freely with them and their kind, and now they forgot him, and scarcely noticed that he lingered beside them. The racing jargon waxed louder, and the voice of young Teddy Oakes asserted itself freely, fretfully above the clatter.

Neither in looks nor yet in manners had the boy improved since the day when he had sprawled upon the floor and played with the little child's tin soldiers, for the influence that filled the pretty yellow house in Park Street yet followed him hard. It had followed him down to his pleasant country home and the simple pleasures that had once satisfied him had seemed to him absurd. His healthy, high-spirited sister had struck him as being clumsy. Rabbit shooting was rotten sport. "The Governor's" horses were crocks, the neighbours frumps, and "the Governor" who found it a hard pinch to keep any horses at all, had rounded pretty plainly on his only son, and Teddy had returned to the small yellow house and to the bitter-sweet atmosphere of Angela Seligman's society, with no trace of the softening influence of home to keep his feet even moderately straight. To-night his young face was flushed and his voice suspiciously thick.

An unaccustomed sensation of loneliness came over Vashon, and did not go away again. He moved a shade nearer and half wished that one of the group would speak to him, and not treat him as if he were some unseen spectre, aiming at a pitiful affection of life, covered, for the time being, in a mask of flesh. A few hours ago he would not have crossed the room to recognise any one of them, but things seemed different now that he was only on the outside edge of life and with a few more steps he would slip over into the eternal shadows. "For after death—what then?" With a smothered oath Vashon ground down his heel. Again that hated appeal! What was it that called it out? Not fear, for he felt no fear. Why did it come again to vex, and perplex and madden him?

"I've a strong fancy for the French horse," sang out Teddy. "The French horse, you know." No one heeded him; they were getting tired of Teddy; he was known to have no money, and none could squeeze blood out of a stone. "The French horse, you know," he repeated noisily.

"Shut up, young fellow," growled an elderly member of the group, "put your feet in hot water and French mustard, that's French enough for you."

The boy fell back sulkily.

"It's a good horse, no better," he mumbled, called for a split, and turning met full a pair of keen dark eyes, that were fixed upon him. Their owner he knew well by sight, and heard of him as being enormously wealthy, exclusive, eccentric. Something in those eyes sobered him: something he could not understand; they seemed to draw him on to speak.

"I was talking of the French horse," he said half shyly.

"Holocaust," answered Vashon, absurdly glad that the lad had spoken to him. "Ah, then you think him good enough to back?"

Teddy's flushed face blazed. He was being drawn

and laughed at by a man who understood horse-flesh as well as any vet in Europe.

But Teddy's silence passed unnoticed, for Vashon had taken a fresh resolve. If the time was short, well, he would live every moment of it; fill every hour with such long lived pleasure as the world offers to its votaries. He would live in the present, wildly, madly, unreasoningly, without thought for the future. The world was slipping from his grasp; while he had yet time he would pluck from it all it could yield him, and the devil take what might come after any day, any week, in a month at most.

Derby day. The weather all that could be desired, the heat less great than on St. Visto's year, the crowd and clamour if anything greater. Boisterous laughter came down from the top of a black and yellow coach, whose occupants had almost finished luncheon. Whose coach it was Neil Vashon did not know, nor yet care, some one had called him up to it, and Mrs. Seligman who sat beside him was, as she herself expressed it, running the show. A pretty blonde woman dressed in white, with particularly white and even teeth, sat immediately in front of him, and some half dozen men, De Cosimo and Teddy Oakes among them, completed the party.

Angela was not looking her best. She knew it, and the knowledge was horrid to her. Her hat, even for her a daring venture, did not become her, and her friend's enthusiastic admiration of it had confirmed her fears, for had it been becoming she would either have condemned it or else said nothing. Also Angela's eyes were less bright than usual, her face was over heated, and her voice was above its natural pitch. With a feeling akin to dismay Vashon noticed her, and when the champagne again circled round he appeared not to see that her glass was quite empty, then as she pushed it towards him he filled it with froth.

"Stingy creature," she cried. "Here, Teddy."

In an instant the boy was beside her and her glass was filled to overflowing. She put it to her lips.

"Don't," said Vashon in an undertone that she alone could hear. "Please, don't."

"What do you mean?" She tried to look defiance, then her eyes fell. "What do you mean," she said below her breath.

"Forgive me, but I think you know."

The contents of the glass remained untouched. Temper, a love that hurt her, and no small shame worked hot within her. She brought her teeth sharply down upon her jewelled pencil case and her friend, who ached to know what was amiss, suavely said.

"Don't, dear, that's so bad for your pretty teeth."

Angela put down the pencil case.

"Quite right, dear, so it is. Teeth are brittle things, and crowning them is painful and expensive, isn't it? You know all about that, love."

Angela brightened up and laughed her own unpurchased ivory into evidence. She had paid her out for the hat.

This little breeze blew quickly by and continuous loud laughter from the coach sounded above the legitimate din. Angela's friend, well used to these amenities and secure in the knowledge that she could always give as good as she got, far from being oppressed metaphorically licked her lips and felt she was in for a real soft thing. A newly discovered Hercules whose purse seemed as long as his limbs, had offered to be her banker. She had forgotten, she said, to bring sufficient money and pined to lay twenty sovereigns on sweet Flying Fox, and back dear Damocles to place, and it was against her principles to bet unless she had the money in her pocket. How kind of him! She would refund him the amount as soon as she could get at her cheque book. Inwardly she wished him joy of the cheque, always supposing he ever got it, and Vashon, who guessed her little game, said he was proud to be of use.

"It's the jolliest Derby day we have ever had," said Angela gaily, "and we've had not a few,"

"So it is," agreed the friend, "and why not? Let us eat, drink and be merry for to-morrow we die."

"Ah!" No one heard the short sharp breath or noticed the stiffening of the muscles that tightened round Vashon's mouth.

"To-morrow," answered Angela nonchalantly, "is a long way off, and my line of life goes right round my thumb. Neil, let me look at yours."

But Vashon had turned aside, and the competitors for the Derby were making their way into the paddock.

First Flying Fox looking the pink of perfection and doing credit to his illustrious lineage. He was followed by Holocaust, but the listlessness of the French horse made such an unfavourable impression that he went back several places in the betting.

"What do you think of him?" asked young Oakes, who had joined Vashon.

"If you are a rich man, and have a fancy for him, and can afford to see your money go by, back him, otherwise let him alone."

There was something about the lad he liked that made him ready to give the advice which Teddy took.

A series of false starts tried Vashon sorely, he struggled hard to flog up some show of enthusiasm. But the audacious words from a light woman's lips swelled in his heart with a force that deafened him to the roar that rose up from the crowd as the flag fell.

"Be merry, for to-morrow you die—you die—be merry."

They hammered in his head, as with an unmeaning stare, he followed the horses.

"You die."

Were the crowd shouting this aloud? He glared at the course and his breath came in gasps.

"Blast the thing." He shouted the curse aloud and it was carried away and died in the riot of sounds.

His glasses lay unheeded in his hand, and Teddy, who had mislaid his own, took and opened them eagerly.

"You really don't want them? A thousand thanks. I'll tell you exactly how it's going. Jove, Holocaust is well in front, the French colt has got the lead." There was disappointment in Teddy's voice. "Flying Fox is not in it. I don't know, he's making advance, but the French colt will romp home. Why he's stopped, stopped short. Holocaust's out of it. Jove, who'd have thought it! Sloane's got down, he's leading him off the course. Thank heavens, I didn't back him! Flying Fox has it. He's won, and won by a couple of lengths."

He turned an excited face towards his companion. One look and he was full of regret.

"I say, I'm dead sorry. I'm afraid Holocaust has hit you hard."

With a start Vashon recollected that the Derby had just been run.

"Holocaust? Ah yes, I backed him heavily and it wasn't worth while to hedge, but the result makes no odds."

"Lucky chap," thought Teddy. "'Pon my word, I thought from his face it had broke him."

With drooping head and scarlet nostrils quivering, and his eyes dim with a dumb pain the French colt was led to a tent, where a pole axe put an end to his short career, for a shattered pastern can claim no cure.

"Poor beggar," said Teddy, "'Tis sad to think he crossed the Channel only to end like this."

And Vashon forgot to answer. Would God that someone would of charity beat out his own life with one swift blow. This waiting for what must soon come was weary work, and the merriment,—he shivered—the merriment a ghastly failure.

For suddenly the unreality of it all came upon him again with added intensity. These human beings round him were like children playing with toys on the edge

of a precipice. What did it all matter when for all there was but one end. It seemed like a grim masque of Death, these trifling men and women dancing to each other's piping, while Death sat apart watching the mockery of life.

"To-morrow we die."

With an inarticulate exclamation Vashon turned from the tent, and Teddy thought that for a man who could afford to see thousands go by, he seemed strangely upset.

"I don't know where he went," he said in answer to Angela's question, "but he set off to walk at an extraordinary rate, and the way by which he went led to nowhere."

It led away from the paddock, the course, the stands, the crowds, the coaches, and Vashon trod it at such a pace that soon these things were far behind him, but the whispering voices went with him. He flung himself down on the ground where the air blew fresh and cool, and the din was muffled by distance, and away from all distractions they rose within his soul ever more insistent, more authoritative. It harassed and disturbed him. Life after Death! Light beyond the space that lay in darkness. He set his teeth for a final resistance.

"There is nothing beyond."

He spoke the words aloud and threw them defiantly to the sky. No answer came in words, yet he was answered, for his soul bowed before the consciousness of a Presence that filled his whole being, driving out the spirit of doubt and unrest. He bent his head upon his hands. The mortal might deny his immortality, but that did not change the fact of it. The struggle was ended. Jacob wrestled again with the angel and had not prevailed.

A sense of protection took the place of unrest. His soul worshipped. What mattered it if this life was short and uncertain, if death meant really the entrance

to fuller, completer life, merely the threshold of the other great Beyond?

With wondering eyes he looked up to the white clouds rolled together in the sky. As a gleam of light in a pit of despair so crept a sense of security into his heart. The distant roar from the race course swept up to him, the breeze, freshening towards evening carried the familiar yells to his ears, but he seemed already to have entered into a shadow-world where such things could not affect him. And the sun's disc had hurled its crimson over the western edge and the peace of evening had hushed the riot of that day, before Neil Vashon moved away from the place where he had flung himself down.

CHAPTER XXIII

MARGARET CRAVEN'S SELF-TAUGHT LESSON

THE May blossom was gone; the poppy fire blazed among the ripening corn, and, adding its touch of colour to the pageant of summer-time, proclaimed the season as plainly as the old sundial told the time of day. The weeks, lengthening out, had set their touch upon Stephen Printhorpe's picture. He had climbed the heights of his ambition, had captured the fair dream-face and brought it under the sway of his brush. It looked at him from the canvas with the luminous, soft eyes of the ideal that had eluded him, and upon Roma Vella's face, as she stood regarding her pictured self, there was left no tell-tale look of personal fear, no trace of the old alarm in the eyes fixed on the soft ones looking back at her, and which followed her as she moved away with restless little feet that brought her back again before her own fair image.

Some weeks had passed since first she had seen the picture, having with trembling knees stolen into the room which Margaret had set apart for the artist's work, and while she scanned with beating heart the scene, all too well remembered, Printhorpe himself had come suddenly upon her. He crossed over and stood silently beside her.

"What a pity," broke from her. "Why did you disfigure the Angel so?"

"A pity? No, no. I could not paint her. I mean to pass now from failure to success."

There was a joyous ring in his voice that held her

silent. Then he had pointed out to her the details in his picture, the buildings in the background, vast, dim and shrouded by the night, the reflected lights on the angry river, the crouching figure, the dawn of day; thus easing the strain between them, and inaugurating a new relation that each succeeding sitting had made less irksome.

And now the picture was finished. One last sitting in the shimmering white dress and it would be complete in every detail. Roma waited in the studio and studied her painted figure.

"It's the last time," she said softly, and drew near her silent immoveable self. "I'm glad, so glad, of course I'm glad. Ah, I don't know what I am—am I sorry? Good-bye, dear thing, you can't answer me or hear me, so there's something I'll say to you. I think I'm sorry, so sorry!"

Hearing footsteps she turned to the window and there Printhorpe followed her. She was used to the intense look that had for hours fixed her, so used to it that there now seemed nothing strange in it, and her colour remained quietly composed, neither deepening nor paling beneath the eyes lingering upon her, not glancing towards the picture.

"Why did you wish me to be dressed like this to-day? For it's finished surely, quite finished."

Then at last he looked at the picture.

"Yes. it's finished."

"Then I shall go and dress again in my right mind."

Her light laugh followed a sigh so soft he could not hear it, she moved towards the door and with a start he followed her.

"Stay," he pleaded, "just for a little while. I want to touch up a fold or two, it's the last time."

She went back to her place by the window and taking up a brush he mechanically mixed some paints upon his palette, but seemed in no hurry to add any touches to the canvas, and there fell silence between them during the last sitting, such as was seldom now between the artist and his model.

Happy in his work, he had made the time pass quickly for her by telling her tales of worlds almost unknown to her. In spirit she had walked with him through Africa's thick jungles breathing the heavy intoxicating scents that arose from the glowing heart of strange flowers; across Australia's silent plains and vast primeval forests, where no leaves fall to mark the death of the season; and into America's great cities, with the mighty throbbing of the strenuous, eager, hurrying life of a nation, young as the world counts the age of people, vigorous fresh, and direct, and conscious of their strength. He had told her of the sure downfall of Asia with only a memory of past magnificence resting upon her jewel-burdened breast, and through tropical heat or ice-cramped leagues of snow, wherever his feet had touched, her own had seemed to follow. •

Sometimes Margaret had joined them, then silence had taken the place of pleasant talk, for she herself had been so strangely silent and the chill of her cold reserve had made itself felt. But Margaret was learning a self-taught lesson, and its mastery was exceeding hard. To all appearance colder, more reticent than ever, it was as though she had found no pleasure in the weeks as they passed, nothing but disenchantment and grey ashes. Who could know that it was the very magnitude of the joy that quivered just outside her grasp that frightened her into a greater degree of self restraint. For a few days following Neil Vashon's sudden departure Margaret had let herself drift rudderless upon a sea of glory, buoyed up with hope, her white sails filled with a breath from the world of shadows, where all things are as we would have them be. Then suddenly she had sought to cast away the vague tremendous hope, and the effort to subdue herself and call forth yet more self control had robbed her of the new found softness of manner that had come with the first whisper of happiness. The hope not dead lay dormant.

But this morning, though the unaccountable chill of

her presence did not fall between them, Printhorpe sat in silence before his easel, till laying down his brush he went over to the window, looked out into the hot summer day, then looked at Roma.

"No, I'm not going out," she answered, understanding his question. "Now that the picture is finished I must make up for lost time and practise steadily."

"What, scales and exercises? I won't dare ask to come with you."

His eyes laughed and she coloured up, then laughed herself, and before disappearing through the door said over her shoulder:

"I thought you said you liked them better than all other music."

Printhorpe went back to his picture, looked at it long and lovingly, knew that he had gained his life's desire. All he had longed for, fame, the assured praise of men, a front seat among the entirely successful, due honour to the power given him, all this was now secured and yet the soul of the artist was unsatisfied, for the mythical dames that spin man's destiny had woven so strong a thread around him that the fateful scissors alone could cut it. So silken was the thread, so cunningly woven that at first he did not feel it, now it was drawn tightly, and Printhorpe's face betrayed that there was something behind his great satisfaction. He fixed his gaze upon the beautiful dark eyes fashioned so faithfully that they were a replica of the living eyes that had such power to move him. Those pictured eyes drew him closer, his heart beat quicker.

"Roma," he cried aloud, and again, "my Roma!"

With the spoken words came the disillusion. He started, stood erect, and coloured hotly at the wave of madness that had swept over him. What had come to him? Where was the calm judgment of a lifetime? The picture was finished, even he, so inexorably hard upon himself and his own handiwork, could find no flaw in it. He and the girl-model, with her chang-

ing moods, and her secret past might now go on their separate ways and never meet again. He had wanted a perfect model. Well! she had sat to him with a sweet patience he had not expected from her. What more did he want? Yet his heart felt cold within him, and the familiar ways looked strange and purposeless. He would go back to the old, easy, comfortable companionship with Vashon, and all things would be as they had been before. Would they? He turned away with a sigh, sharp and quick as the click of a key in a lock, a yearning on his face ill-fitted to one so entirely satisfied, and deep down in his heart a restless, undefined desire.

Roma ran swiftly to her room, but she took off her white robe more slowly than usual, smoothed the soft folds, drew them through her fingers and lingered with them, before she let them glide to the ground.* Quickly coiling the glinting hair, she dressed herself, gathered up the white robe, laid it carefully aside, and felt that she had closed a chapter in her short life's history. Forgetting she had meant to go to the music room she took up a book quite at haphazard, went out of doors and sat down to read it. Her eyes followed the printing, but her mind strayed from it, for numberless things came to distract her. The haymakers topping the ricks, the white clouds passing slowly behind the hills, the cart mare grazing in the meadow, the swift passing of gossamer wings and feathers, all these claimed her wavering attention. She put down the book and idly meditated, then caught it up again as Margaret joined her and sat down beside her.

"What, dreaming again, Roma! Does your book bore you? Is life so much more interesting than fiction?"

"I think so, Cousin Margaret, when one is happy. When the sun shines, I feel it is good just to be alive."

"You child of the South! Good to be alive!" a half-stifled sigh broke from her. "Ah no, Roma, life is often sad, dreary and altogether unsatisfactory. You, too, will find that out in time."

"Cousin Margaret, how can that be? The world is so beautiful, let me still believe that life is good."

"Believe it as long as you can, child; if you are happy in your fool's paradise, stay there."

Roma winced at the half contemptuous tone of the elder woman. But she took heart again under the spell of the warm sunshine.

"Cousin Margaret," she said, half appealingly, half shyly, "I think there must be happiness in the world if we only look for it, and believe in it. There is so much beauty and . . . there is love."

Lady Margaret turned upon her with a laugh that jarred on Roma's mood.

"Love! There is no such thing. That is the greatest absurdity of all. Listen, child: when one is very young, life looks fair and sweet, and holds all sorts of glorious possibilities, and the fairest of them all is love. Every young girl, like a white Undine, soulless, longs for her own soul's awakening at the touch of a man's love. Each human soul imprisoned in its own limited personality yearns for the kiss of the Prince, who, breaking through the encircling barrier of rose bushes, shall awaken her from her maiden slumber and lead her from her enchanted castle into the real, beautiful world of great deeds, where all the men are noble and all the women good, and where love alone holds sway. A dream, child! nothing but a dream! The first kiss of love does not awaken; the maiden comes forth as a sleep-walker with the golden visions of dreamland still about her. The awakening comes later, but it lasts for ever. Happiness was a part of the visions of the sleeper. It escapes at the first touch of reality. Love, too, eludes our detaining grasp when we seek to understand it. Love takes flight with the first ray of daylight let in on the human soul, and leaves a mere simulacrum of itself made up of self-seeking, mere desire and greed. Little Roma, I would have you come gently to the knowledge of life and be spared my rude awakening."

"No such thing as love!" echoed Roma sadly. "Oh, Cousin Margaret, if there is no love in the world, it is a horrible place, every one for himself, and greed and cruelty alone would be left."

Turning away her head from the sight of those pleading half-terrified eyes, in subdued tones Margaret murmured to herself

"Our life is like a narrow raft
Afloat upon a hungry sea,
Whereon is but a little space,
And each one eager for a place
Doth thrust his brother in the sea,
And so our life is wan with fears,
And so the sea is salt with tears,
Ah, well is thee, thou art asleep!"

"Cousin Margaret, I am frightened. Why are we put into the world at all?"

"To learn renunciation," said the elder woman sadly.

"It is cruel," cried Roma, her whole nature rising in protest against the dreary loveless creed. "If I thought God could be so cruel, I should cease to believe in Him, and should think instead that a spiteful devil had made the earth as a freak in order to torture men and women at his pleasure."

Margaret was silent.

"Cousin Margaret, speak to me. I must believe in love—I feel it in myself," she laid her hand timidly on that of the elder woman. "I think," she went on shyly, "that there is love, glorious love in the world, for God made it and He is Love."

"Well, child, keep your faith as long as you can. My want of it has not made me happy." Margaret smiled sadly, then abruptly changed the subject. "This morning I was looking at the picture. It is finished now, I fancy."

"Yes, the last touches were given it this morning. Mr. Printhorpe says it is quite finished, and I suppose in a day or two he will take it away."

"Take it away! Why should you suppose any such thing?"

Roma sighed. Margaret's voice had become sharp and irritable, and all the softness had gone out of her face.

"I thought," she faltered, "that having finished the picture there was nothing to keep him."

"You take too much upon yourself, Roma, far too much."

"Cousin Margaret, I take nothing, nothing; why is it that I seem only to vex you now?"

The shining eyes and voice all full of pain touched the elder woman. She put out a lean, sallow hand that Roma took and held fast gladly.

"Dear, forgive me, the heat wearies and tries me, and makes me irritable." She paused, looked weary enough, and then went on with curious nervous haste. "If Mr. Printhorpe cares to stop he is very welcome. I find him a pleasant companion, and now that he has finished his work, I shall see more of him."

"Yes," said Roma absently.

There was a sudden twitch of Margaret's hand in hers, and Printhorpe, with an open letter in his hand, came towards them.

"It's from Neil," he said, and looking at Margaret sat down beside her. "A letter from him is a rare event, and this one is certainly surprising."

"What is he doing that he doesn't come back?"

"Apparently many things. He says the heat in town is infernal, and the crowd unbearable and yet he says nothing about leaving it. He went to the Derby, made a pot of money, lost it all, and more beside, at Sandown, this from Neil who is by way of never betting. 'Paw my word, it's well I'm going to look after him. It all sounds as if he were on the high road to Bedlam.'"

"Does he allude to your return?"

"Never mentions it, the whole thing beats me; he never hints at it, and seems quite content without me."

"Then why not let Neil alone; he'll come back in time, can't you, won't you wait for him?"

Roma whose head had been turned away, whose eyes had followed the vagaries of a little spinning spider scrambling across her knee, looked up quickly. Was it Margaret speaking? She stared at her. Was it Margaret's face flushed with anxiety, her eyes lit with longing? Then the truth flashed its way into Roma's heart and she understood the meaning of things that had till now perplexed her. The quick show of irritation that had of late spoilt Margaret's manner. The small attempts to lighten her dreary look and sombre dress, yes, even a subtle, gentle little hint of coquetry and wish to please which had puzzled Roma as being so absolutely at variance with Margaret's usual aloofness and calm stateliness. Was this the key to it all? Did Margaret, the pale, cold Margaret, love? . . ! What has she been saying? No such thing as love. Ah, Cousin Margaret, that was not true, not true.

Roma roused herself with an effort from her thoughts, and heard Margaret saying with a glad note in her voice.

"Then that is settled, and you will not leave us yet."

The spider's doom was dealt to him with an awful suddenness; a small finger ended his hopes and cares together.

One quick look at Printhorpe, and Roma knew that he was quite content to linger. She raised her eyes to Margaret's face, but it revealed too much, and she turned them quickly to the far-off fields, cut up like squares on a chess-board, corn-gold and green, and surely it was the sunshine that dazzled her sight, confused the colours and set the squares all awry. A great sense of desolation stirred in the poor little heart. A feeling akin to dismay settled blankly upon her. She must struggle with it and battle it down. What did it mean? what was it?

Then there fell over Roma a strange humour that lasted till the birds had whistled the greater part of

that day away. A mood of almost mad merriment, reckless talk, and light laughter. She was gay as the poppies that glowed on her breast, and that burned like a flame in Printhorpe's eyes, while her voice rang in his heart even when she herself was silent, and always lovely, her beauty to-day was emphasised by something that amazed even though it dazzled him. Margaret neither chid nor checked her. It might be that she was sorry for the uncalled-for irritability that had hurt the young thing that morning, or perhaps it was that her own happiness made her very gentle and indulgent.

"Where to now," she said, for Roma, having settled herself on one of the terrace steps, stood up and looked about her, "where to? I doubt if you have been still to-day for one consecutive half hour."

"I'm going to the river, and I shall take my rod and catch, not a fish, but some leaves and perhaps a cluster of weeds."

She was gone before anyone could answer her, and Printhorpe stood up suddenly.

"Go with her," said Margaret, but he hesitated.

"I think not."

"But you are fond of fishing," she urged, glad, so foolishly glad that he made no haste to leave her.

"I am, but —" he paused, and Margaret, poor soul, humble under love's dominion, waited, hungering for a word from him urging her to go too, to walk upon her own grounds and stand beside her own river with him. She waited patiently but hopefully till he should speak.

"I think," he said, "I'll follow your suggestion."

She watched him, shading her eyes lest the strong light should fall between him and her, and seeing that he took an opposite direction to the one Roma had taken concluded that he wished to be alone. She waited till the last glimpse of the strong, well-knit figure was out of sight, then went home satisfied.

CHAPTER XXIV

ROMA, MY ROMA!

HAVING selected suitable flies, Printhorpe set up his rod and stood by the bend of the river. For a time he flogged it, where the water ran smoothly in deeper shadow, a perfect spot for capture; but either the trout were especially wily, or else he failed to cast with his usual patience and skill, for beyond an occasional nibble there was no promise of sport, and he moved further down the stream where the sunlight, hot upon the water, made his chances even smaller.

Stepping back some paces and shading his eyes, he looked keenly down to the place where the river, turning sharply under a bridge, reappeared and ran shallower till it slowed into a thin silver stream, and he knew that it was there that he would find Roma in her favourite place. The knowledge that she was so near made him restless. In his incomplete comprehension of his own heart he felt it were safer to remain where he was and yet the spell of her was drawing him to her round the bend of the silver stream. For a while, resisting that spell, he cast again and watched the play of light and the small stars twinkling on the water. But the profitless sport soon palled upon him. The fisherman must be heart whole to be successful. Printhorpe's thoughts followed the bend of the river. His real inclination lay in the same direction. What is the mere will of a man against such odds?

Reeling in his ineffectual line he set off over the fields and crossed the bridge that spanned the river.

Roma looked up as she saw him and began reeling her line in.

"I'm going in," she said, and reeled it faster.

"You have only just come out."

"That is all I ever catch."

She drew in a tangle of weed and he stooped to disentangle it.

"What hooks!" he smiled, "and who put them on?"

"I did. I hate fishing."

He looked up at her almost wistfully.

"Then you would not care to learn how to fasten them rightly. Won't you let me show you? You might perhaps like fishing better if you gave yourself some chance of catching fish."

"That's true," laughed Roma, "thank you."

The simple mystery was quickly understood—more quickly than Printhorpe cared for. He bent over the busy little fingers, his own touched them frequently as they so deftly tied knots that often proved quite wrong. Was there ever so apt a pupil or a more exacting teacher, and did ever two hearts beat faster, louder? So loud that it was as though their throbbing must overbear the summer sounds that made music through the golden strings the sunbeams had strung from the sky. The rustling of leaves and ripple of water, the faint vibration of reeds and grasses, the fluttering of passing wings and buzz of honey bee—all the sounds of summer that swelled to full perfection in a chorus of song that had never a note of discord, for the birds all sang of the same dear theme and love was the burden of their song.

Under no pretext could Printhorpe declare that the flies were not rightly tied. At all events Roma considered them satisfactory, for she caught up the rod before he could check her.

"Take care," he cried. The warning came too late. She had whisked a fish hook into her wrist.

He examined the injury with a face far more concerned than her own.

"There is only one thing to be done and that is to get a doctor to—" he paused, least he should frighten

"To cut it out," she said and laughed. "How absurd! Fancy sending several miles for a doctor to cut a hook out. Couldn't you pull it out?"

"Don't hint at such a thing." The mere suggestion made him shudder. "But if you will trust me, I can get it out in the right way: thank heaven it is nowhere near a vein; and it has not gone in deeply. There is the sharpest possible little lancet in my knife, and it will hurt me infinitely more than it will hurt you."

"Then, please will you do it?"

"I'd hate anyone else to touch it," he answered, hotly, and it was not the thought of coming pain that made her colour come and go. "Don't watch it, turn away your head, and may misfortune claim me if I hurt you."

But Roma did not turn away her head, for her eyes caught the sparkle of the silver coin swinging from the chain that Printhorpe drew from his pocket, and having detached his knife, let slip to the ground. She shrank back. Her mother's name flashed scarlet, as on the day when her child had repudiated the little amulet she longed to repossess.

"Can't you bear it? I would not hurt you for all the world, but perhaps you would sooner it was done by someone you could put more trust in."

"What a coward I am," she spoke with sudden passion, "to be terrified of so very small a thing."

She did not flinch at a sharp swift stroke, for her heart was too set on other things to feel it.

"There!" cried Printhorpe with infinite satisfaction, holding up the fish hook in his fingers.

But delight was short lived, for her face was deathly white, and even as she told him she had felt no hurt,

her eyes shewed pain and deep disquiet. The blood from her wrist streamed fast. He tore his handkerchief into strips, steeped them in the river, and bound the wound with gentle lingering touch. Did ever small injury claim such care, or was ever so tenderly cared for.

There was yet one strip to bind in order to make the task complete; but his hand shook, it became all at once so hard to wind it round the little injured wrist that lay so passive to his touch. For as he stood there in the magical warmth and glow of the summer tide, his mind, by one of those sudden, uncalled for leaps back into the past, set him once more in the familiar, fire-lit studio, where the flickering light played over the gleaming marble perfection of the Cnidian Venus. His hand rested again upon her ice-cold shoulder and he heard his own voice vaunting her powerlessness to stir him from his artist-calm, or touch him with a thought of love, yea, even though her lovely limbs should move with sudden life, her blind eyes speak the soul within her, a colour flush over the snow-white of her. No living, breathing woman should have the power to stir his blood, or set his heart-beats quicker. Here he stood, his pulses thrilling at the touch of a living breathing woman, his heart thundering close beside hers, his eyes bent low to hide the betraying fire of them. Why this was *love! Love!* for him! He felt his self-control slipping from him. He must have time to think this strange thing out. That one little last bandage to wind; he bent so low over it that a stray tendril of her hair brushed his forehead, and the opium-scented breath of the drooping poppies at her breast affected him strangely as a drug. Almost roughly, with desperate haste he fixed the last bandage in place, dropped the passive hand and turned abruptly away, unheeding that she forgot to thank him; for Roma's thoughts too had strayed far from present things.

He walked some little distance to the rod she had flung down and began to put it up.

Eager anxious eyes followed him. His back was turned to her, he was busy with the rod. The chain he had forgotten lay at her feet. It glistened on the grass, the silver coin, the scarlet letters. It was not his, it was hers, and she dared not openly claim the precious little gift given by the dear dead mother.

"Love it for my sake and keep it for ever," the weak voice whispered very near her.

Excitement blinded, deafened her. The chain was in her hand, the coin between her fingers, with all her strength she wrenched and freed it. The chain fell to the ground. He stood before her, his eyes fastened upon the coin that lay in her open hand.

Fiercely she clasped it. Threw back her beautiful head erect, and proud, and with panting breast and face full of defiance her voice rang clear in the silence.

"It is mine. I sang that night, for we were starving."

The dusky fire died out in her eyes, and there crept over them the pain that shadows the eyes of a stag, worn out and mortally wounded. She put out two beseeching hands as though entreating him to spare her, then turning away suddenly she buried her face in her hands, leaned against the trunk of an ivy-tangled tree and cried most bitterly. The moment was fraught with bitterness for both. To Printhorpe it seemed as if all the heart miseries that had been spared to him for years were concentrated into that little minute. Something that swelled in his throat prevented speech, and when it came, his voice was husky with intense emotion.

"Roma, Roma, Roma!"

Half fearfully he touched a quivering shoulder.

"Roma, my Roma!"

Gently he drew away a hand from her burning face; her tears fell on his fingers and they closed more

tightly over their little captive. Where was his indifference, his coldness, his wisdom now? All he knew, all he cared was that she was in trouble, and that he longed to comfort her, that he adored and worshipped her, and had somehow brought this misery upon her. Poor little quivering thing, poor little girl. What it had cost her to speak so bravely, so honestly at last.

Her sobs were ceasing gradually. She was growing calmer, but she still held her face turned away from him.

"Don't cry, little girl; don't you know that I love you? What is the past to you or me that it should hurt you so and overshadow our glorious present? Forget all the past, dear, all that we have not lived together. I have been waiting for you all my life, I think, and now I have found you, I can think of nothing else. If out of the dark of our past, our lives once drew together even for a moment——," she shivered and tried to free her hand, "No, no, little prisoner," he said tenderly, and laid his lips upon it, and it was still. He went on softly, "If for one moment, dear, trouble sent you across my path and brought you to the very spot where I was seeking for just *you*, Roma, that is our secret, known to no one else in the wide world, and an eternal link between us. But for your suffering, dear, I could bless the misery that drove you, you brave little thing, that night into my life. You came all unknowingly, you tried to escape, but now, you will come knowingly, and will stay with me evermore? Roma, Roma, speak to me."

"Forgive me," she whispered, her face turned away, though ~~the~~ sobbing had ceased, and she had grown very still.

"Forgive you? For what?" •

"I lied to you."

"You poor little girl! The fault was mine. It was the self-defence of a hunted thing against the hunter,

Nay, rather forgive me, my Roma, I had no right to press you. So you have been frightened of me. Was that what kept us apart, dear?"

"Yes."

"There is no other reason?"

"No, no."

"Roma, turn your face to me, come to me, my dear, my dear, that for all time I may love and worship you."

She turned suddenly with a glad surrender, and his arms drew her close. No tears could quench the shining in the eyes that looked up to him.

"I would not wish for worship, only teach me, only teach me!"

"What?—to love me, dear heart of mine?"

"No, no, not that. You could not teach me what I know already! But oh, teach me to understand that life has lost all its bitterness and dread."

Shadows grew longer and deeper while the two by the river bank were revealing themselves each to the other in those rare sweet moments of life when the veil between hearts is lifted, and heart speaks to heart in that utter unreserve which we possess in childhood, lose in the earliest contact with experience, and find again with joy only in the purest earthly love. If hearts are akin, it lasts, and union has something of the divine; if there be no real affinity of nature, it endures but a moment; then barriers rise, the veil falls again.

"We go our ways, and twain are once more twain." It is a foretaste of the days when we shall know even as we are known; and that knowledge, that complete vision, in its rapture or in its utter misery, shall constitute the joys of Heaven and the pangs of Hell.

The two by the river lost count of time, for love keeps no clock. The flowers would soon be closing their petals for sleep, and moths begin to burr, for the sun was swinging towards other worlds leaving a flush of colour.

Roma turned her head towards it.

"I think it is late." She pointed to the crimson west.

He put his hand on the cheek turned from him and drawing her towards him, looked at her with worship in his eyes and whispered as he kissed the little cluster of stray curls.

"The red gold flashing fire. Roma, how proud I am, surely in all the world no man is as proud as I am, and I'm longing to tell the world of the happiness that has come to me. How I wonder what Neil will say," he paused for an instant's reflection and went on as though he were reasoning with himself. "He will forgive my defection, and not be too hard on my conversion, even though he cannot understand. But he has seen you and knows you, yet even so, how can he comprehend how small everything is in comparison with the joy of loving you. I shall write to him to-night, Roma, send him a message by me."

"Tell him to come and see how happy I am; tell him to come back soon."

"Dear message! It will surely bring him."

"It is growing late; see the waves of crimson are fading to rose."

They stood yet a moment to watch the death of the day that had given them to each other.

"If we are late I think we'll be forgiven. Lady Margaret—dear heart, why draw your hand away?"

"I had forgotten her."

"And so had I. I forgot the world and everyone in it, but you, and am longing to forget them all again."

"I forgot her."

Amazed he looked at her.

"You are not afraid of her? Come and together we will tell her."

"No, no, she must not know. I mean not yet."

How could she tell him why she shrank, with a woman's intuitive knowledge of another woman's heart,

from taking their new happiness to Margaret, just Margaret. What reason could she give him without betraying the secret she had herself only that very day surprised in her eyes, and in the glad tone of her voice and in the whole softening of her? How could she betray her to him and wound the pride of a desperately proud self-contained woman? Yet how could she endure that he should go to Margaret in all the new gladness of their love and seek her sympathy, and ask for the little cousin she had befriended, all unconscious of the stabs he was dealing the heart that she had given him all unasked. And how could she, Roma, whom she had rescued from sheer destitution and set in the midst of comfort, and all that was best and noblest, how could she bear to stand by, knowing all, and watch her heart bleeding silently drop by drop—for Margaret would never betray herself? She could not do it. She must have time to think. Oh poor, poor Margaret!

Stephen stood thinking.

"But I must tell Neil, he will write and she will hear from him. That would vex her for our want of confidence."

"Then say nothing to him, not yet, only tell him to come back soon. Let me write and tell him the picture is finished and to come and see it. That will interest him for it was what he most seemed to care about—and when he comes let him tell her."

"But, Roma, I cannot understand; why not tell her now at once. Why should I conceal what makes me so happy and proud?"

Her eyes were fixed upon him with an intensity of entreaty which seemed to him wholly disproportionate to the occasion, but which disarmed him. He wavered between the straight integrity of his habitual action and the wish to please the child who, strangely, seemed to care so much about it. While he hesitated, Roma spoke:

"Please let us keep our secret just for a little while all to ourselves, before we let the whole world in. I love to think there is something lying hidden in your heart, and in mine, that no one else in all the world knows anything at all about. Just you and I, just we two. Stephen," her lips faltered over the strange new name, "I ask it, will you refuse me?"

No, not with those eyes, into which the tears were welling again, raised beseechingly to his; with those red lips parted and so close to his, the dear voice trembling with entreaty.

"Darling, I will do as you wish, only do not ask me to keep the secret of my happiness too long."

Hand in hand they walked home together till the red gables of the Court rose up before them. But for the moment, the veil had again fallen between the hearts that had beat as one. One of them at least now held its own reticences, and a silence fell between them. To Stephen it was just the little crumpled rose leaf in his great happiness; in Roma's heart there rang one word—Margaret!

CHAPTER XXV

AN ANSWER TO A BURNING QUESTION

"THAT'S done with," thought Neil Vashon, laying down a document that he had been reading over, "and it's all fair and square. Stephen will get this house and the lumber that is in it, that means that it will belong equally to Margaret, though of course I can't say so. I wonder if Margaret will turn the picture of Tod Sloane out of the room, and hide Madame Venus behind a palm tree. There is nothing else I can leave to Dolly, he has got a pretty big pile of his own, and in that way Margaret wants for nothing. The hospital for incurables will get a lift, poor souls, and ail the rest goes to the little girl—to Roma. Thank God, she will never have to fight for a living. Bad thing for a girl to be penniless, and she'll have more than most of them, and she'll take good care of old Peter. Well, that's all."

He folded the paper with care, put it in a prominent place at the top of a drawer, and wondered what he should do next, there was so little to be done in London on a Sunday. But there was always much to think about, and his thinking time had all but run out. With the drifting days the ever present sense of unreality had deepened. He was a ghost gliding among things that only looked substantial, that melted at his touch. Why had anything ever seemed of consequence, the things men set such store by? Money, position, fame, society with its evanescent fashion, its ever shifting *mise-en-scène*. What did it all matter when it must all come to this?

He felt like a condemned prisoner in his cell,

sentenced, but the day of execution not yet fixed. "Any day, any week, in a month at most." And now three weeks and some days of the fourth week had fallen away. Saturday gone for ever, Sunday going, Monday coming, or it might be the end, and no Tuesday at all. He experienced a curious feeling of contempt for the men and women so concerned in reaching after the things many might never get, and none could ever keep, the difference was so marked between them and him. He knew almost to a day how long he had to live, they knew nothing, and, knowing nothing, shut their eyes to the inevitable end of it all. He faced the darkness, peered through it in vain; oh, that it were possible for someone to come back and say how he had fared in that unexplored place. Would he just cease to be, he, Neil Vashon, to be no more, like the French horse under the pole-axe, knocked clean out of the race. If so, what was the use of this poor little life? If the dead, countless as the stars and the sea sand, were never to awake from their shroud-sleep, if there was no smouldering spark, no latent life in them all, nothing but blackened embers, to what end were men born and why had life in them ever been kindled. But what if death meant life and had a deeper meaning, and he had not troubled to find it out? Supposing death meant, not an end of all, but the beginning, the entrance into a fuller life free from the limitations of the flesh? The only real thing in all the world seemed to him the personality of Neil Vashon. Would that persist when all had crumbled away? He found to his surprise it was the one thing he was really sure of. Even the Buddhists believed in the persistence of the Karma after death, at least until by repeated incarnation the purification is complete, and the unit is gathered again into the whole.

That would give life a meaning. The school of the soul, set here to learn its lesson. What was the supreme lesson set in the soul's school?

Neil Vashon pondered long and carefully. Shutting his mind to all other things, came to no conclusion, and the sound of the church bells floating above the chastened hum of Piccadilly reached him.

Had the churches the answer to the question? Could they help him? He had gone to church scores of times before, but not for many years now, and never to seek the answer to a searching question. And now he could hear the different church bells ringing. It might be well to go to one of them and hear what they had to say about God, and life, and death.

It was quite immaterial which church he went to. He had limited knowledge of any of them, so he followed some people with prayer books in their hands, along Piccadilly, up Bond Street, and into one of the smaller streets; threading their way through Mayfair, then into a small and, from the outside, simple looking building, where he took up a seat near the door.

The church was mostly filled by a very fashionable congregation, and amongst them he saw the newly-wedded Countess de Cosimo, looking well content with the famous de Cosimo pearls round her throat. The heat was almost stifling, fans waved languidly to and fro, and an old lady of extravagant proportions who was sitting beside him snorted a good deal, and the strange noises she made in her throat made him shiver. Vashon glanced towards the door, half decided to beat a retreat, but checked himself and remained.

The service went on, but still the sense of discrepancy and unreality remained with him. Petitions so solemn that they seemed fitting only to the soul prostrate in utter humiliation before its God, flowed easily from the lips of those well-dressed men and women leaning slightly forward in their comfortable seats, at the decent angle prescribed by conventionality. Was he alone earnest in all the world? Was he already a ghost moving among his fellow-men, endued with the fatal faculty of seeing things as they are?

Perhaps he fidgetted, for the old lady beside him, earnestly entreating that her heart might be inclined to keep the laws, most of which it seemed improbable she would ever be tempted to break, looked at him reproachfully. So he remained immovable, fixed his attention on things present, then heard with a quick hope the number of the hymn before the sermon. Would it by any chance be the hymn that she had heard outside Hope Chapel on that golden Sunday. But it was another, and as he listened to the first line of it his eyes fell again on the Countess de Cosimo. She, too, was singing:—

“ My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.

• “ Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast
Save in the cross of Christ, my God,
All the vain things that charm me most
I sacrifice them—— ”

The old lady knocked over his hat that he had laid between them. He picked it up and very carefully smoothed it over with his coat sleeve. A ruffled high hat was a horrible, a degrading thing; and this was a new one. He looked at it ruefully, then all but laughed. How absurd of him to mind, it would last his time!

He looked up. The preacher stood in the pulpit ready to begin his discourse. Vashon's heart sank; this sleek, well-groomed, delicate-handed cleric looked too thoroughly content with the present world to satisfy his hunger for the things concerning the next.

A scholarly, academic discourse on original sin, that was calculated to disturb no one, left Vashon unimpressed, and utterly disappointed. It was all so well conducted, so excellent, so cold. He had asked for bread and they had offered him the stone of dogma instead of the love of God, the brotherhood of Christ.

Apparently the old lady found the discourse too deep for her, for her eyes were bent on a piece of paper

that lay between the leaves of her Bible. Her lips were moving, in her face was enthusiasm. What was she so intently studying? He wished he could see it; it must be something very helpful and inspiring. Again he determined to listen to the sermon, again gave it up as hopeless. The old lady was now sound asleep, her leaflet fluttered to the ground. Cautiously he picked it up and read,

“How to become slim.”

Vashon laid the leaflet on the seat, stood up and slipped out of the open door. It was uncomfortably hot, and there seemed no point in further stay, nothing more to stay for.

Perhaps he had hit upon the only church that could not help him, even though this had failed him others might supply his need. Later on that evening he would try another, in the meantime how little there was to do. Did ever a day seem to drag as this day, even he whose days, whose hours had almost slipped away, thought it tedious. He flung himself down on a seat and watched the crowd which the churches had emptied out, file by. Soon he moved away, the endless stream of life and colour tired him. He did not want to meet with anyone he knew, yet it was very lonely, and despite his wish for solitude, he was almost glad when a man he had not met for years accosted him, and together they walked to the club for luncheon.

His companion, a burly good-hearted country gentleman, with a solid hatred for the conventionalities of London, employed some moments inveighing against the heat, the noise, the crowd, till Vashon mildly hinted it was in his own power to reduce the crowd by one at least.

“Can’t my dear fellow, I’ve married a wife, therefore I melt, I curse, I consume with misery, yet obey withal, and feel like an elephant hunted by a grasshopper. She’s a little bit of a thing, and those small-women always get their own way. What think you?”

"Don't ask me, I've no experience."

"It's time you had. •You're getting on," said his friend surveying him.

"I fancy I have got on."

"What are your present plans. You used to be a restless sort of fellow. Where are you off to now?"

"Haven't the vaguest idea. Wish I had."

"You're surely not going to stay in this infernal stew-house."

"No, I shan't stay here."

"Going abroad? Well, if the missis will spare me for a couple of months or so, I've a good mind to go with you."

"Wish to goodness you would. I'd give a deal if a friend would come along with me, but the drawback is that you'd never get back again, and mightn't like it when you got there."

"But where by all that blazes, are you going to? What do you know about the place?"

"Mighty little, and I haven't the ghost, the glimmer of an idea how to get to it."

"Confound you for humbugging a fellow. Well, let me know your plans. I'll write anyhow. Suppose the club will always find you."

With the instinct of a mortally wounded animal creeping away to die alone, Vashon hugged his secret. Besides the news would not blend nicely with the Lager beer and under-cut of cold sirloin his friend was enjoying; it might jar upon him. So he plunged into other topics that lasted till the other remembered he had to take the missis to a Queen's Hall concert and hurried off hot haste.

A hand was laid on Vashon's arm. Turning he saw Teddy Oakes, who with shining grateful eyes tried to say something that was difficult to express.

"I've been watching for you. I want to thank, to try to thank you."

"Nonsense, I've done nothing."

"Done nothing? You squared me up. Set me straight, saved me from having to chuck the regiment, and here is something you never even asked for." With trembling fingers he handed Vashon a piece of paper. "It's an I.O.U. for the amount."

"Thank you," said Vashon taking the paper which he tore into many pieces and tried to stem Teddy's torrent of speech. "Look here, I don't want the money. I've no use for it and never shall have. It's no more good to me than a cartload of road stones. You're more than welcome to it, but don't play the game again; spending sixpence when you've only got three-pence is a precious rotten game."

"I could go on my knees to you," said Teddy fervently.

"For mercy's sake don't, you'd be chucked out of the club," laughed Vashon. "Now, not another word about it."

"If I don't bore you, if I'm not keeping you, there is something I want to tell you. I'm off to Natal almost immediately; the regiment is under orders. Oh! what if I'd been obliged to leave it, it would have looked as if I'd farked it."

"I'm delighted you haven't. I suppose it's in view of a row with the slimy Boer that they are sending troops out. 'Pon my soul, I don't know that a war would, in some ways, do much harm, especially to young chaps like you. It will teach, as nothing else will, that life has something beside good sport, pleasant living and—well, women." With these words Neil Vashon gave the very last thought that he would ever give to the same fair woman that was making Teddy miserable." And what are you up to now?" he added.

"I have got a couple of days' leave, it's all I could get and lucky to get it just now."

"And are you going home?"

Teddy hesitated.

"I don't know. I had a bit of a breeze with my people last time I was at home. I put their backs up."

"Go home, don't think twice about it. Man alive, haven't you got a mother. Do you owe nothing to her? Go home and make the very most of her." He knew well enough where and with whom he would otherwise spend his time. "Go now and give her something good to think about, who knows if you'll ever see her again." •

"I'm going," said the boy eagerly, "and thank you for all you've said and all you've done." With all his force he wrung Vashon's hand.

Teddy Oakes went home. He remembered that visit, and thought about it, as many a time he lay under the skies, drenched with dew, or parched with thirst; as he tramped the veldt and climbed the heights, with broken boots and tattered clothing, every tear an honour, every stain a glory, till at last he lay at the summit of Spion Kop, his dead face turned to the sky. But Teddy was very safe now. Safer far in death. And at home, those who loved him, lived over and retraced each moment of that last visit, when they had felt they had regained him.

• •

Neil Vashon watched till Teddy Oakes' hansom had turned the corner and now he wondered what he should do next. Like most of us on the eve of a journey he felt disinclined for any of his usual occupations. Nothing seemed worth the doing. Perhaps it would be best to walk away some of the hours that hung so heavily till the evening services should bring him further opportunities for his quest. By five o'clock he had covered a long distance. People were pouring into the Oratory. Why not follow them; he had no prejudices to conquer. Truth and light, no matter whence they came.

The cool shelter from the glare outside, the magni-

ficent space and vast height, the soft lights and sweet music, the priestly procession, gorgeously apparelled, prostrating before the Holy of Holies, these things appealed to his senses. God was in His temple. The fragrant breath of incense floated past him, the very air was saturated with the spirit of peace and prayer. His emotions were stirred, and he tried to join in the worship around him. But he was like a stranger in a foreign land. The ritual distracted him; he did not understand what they were doing. Someone poked a book at him. He fumbled through it, and by the time he had found the right place, the choir were chanting quite a different thing. Flute-like voices were singing; he leaned forward and listened with delight.

"Domine ad adjuvandum me festina," chanted the choir. His lips moved.

"O Lord, make haste to help me." In his own tongue he repeated it.

With measured tread and face of utmost gravity the priest ascended the pulpit, and in all that throng, that had gathered together there was no listener more eager to hear than the man with strong rugged face, iron grey hair, and keenly anxious eyes.

The sermon, long and well delivered, treated entirely of the merits, the influence, power and gracious ways of St. Anne, mother of the blessed Virgin Mary. God and His Christ seemed to be minor considerations, and from the beginning to the end were scarcely alluded to.

Vashon left the Chapel; he had no wish to hear more about St. Anne. Then as he stood outside hesitating there arose within him the memory of a little Mission Church in a sordid suburb in which he had once found himself. The preacher was known to Printhorpe, and prompted chiefly by curiosity they had gone there together to hear him. Even in those days he had been impressed by the intense personality of the young missionary. To this day he recalled the text and the subject of the sermon:—

"Ye that love the Lord, see that ye hate the thing that is evil." *Noblesse oblige* was the keynote. He remembered how it struck him at the time. That was the motive of action, not hope of Heaven, or fear of Hell, but from nobility of nature as sons of God. If he could only find that man again, he felt sure he might help him. It was so long ago the man might be dead, or a bishop! Well, he had nothing to do,—as well do that as anything else. So once more he set forth, a modern Sir Galahad on his quest for the Holy Grail.

The windows of the little iron Church were all lighted up, the poor simple little service was proceeding. They were singing, and Vashon slipped inside without disturbance. A woman in a shabby shawl with a pinched wan face offered him part of her hymn-book and they shared it together. But it was only when the hymn was over and they sat down that Vashon saw again the face of the man that had impressed him so. Older he was, and worn and grayer now, but the same intensity of purpose was stamped upon it, the same intent look in his eyes that seemed as though they held communion with the unseen. As Vashon heard the text a feeling of great content stole over him.

"Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, Him declare I unto you. If haply they might feel after Him, though He be not far from every one of us."

In a few rapid touches the preacher sketched the scene, the time, the audience and the speaker of that grand discourse at Athens, making it vivid and real to the humblest of his listeners in the little Mission Church. He showed them St. Paul standing fearlessly there on the Areopagus, in the midst of the grandest city of the ancient world, gorgeous even in its decay, which had given to the world an art so perfect that it was the despair of after years and other races who might faintly imitate, but never hope to excel. Athens, the cradle of philosophy and the starting point of every

science. And the audience—no Jews with their proud exclusiveness, or their Hellenistic converts, but philosophers of the two ruling schools of thought, Epicureans and Stoics, with a sneer upon their lips. "What will this babbler say?" Epicureans—materialists, with their Godless creed; "Let us eat and drink and be merry, for to-morrow we die." Stoics, with their proud indifference to the ills of this life, their highest ideal, absorption into the Divinity. What was there in the Universe that their wisdom had not traversed?

Amongst them all St. Paul stood up alone, yet unafraid. Face to face with paganism, he flinched not. From the mass of superstition around him, from a city with altars and statues to every conceivable divinity he selected one inscription—"To the Unknown God." St. Paul was no iconoclast; those statues and altars have been their modes of "feeling after God." In Jupiter—Sky Father—they worship the power of the Unknown God; in Venus, His beauty; in Pallas, His wisdom—all modes of expressing the diverse parts of the Omnipresent God. "Whom ye ignorantly worship, Him declare I unto you." It took a man bold in the strength and fervour of absolute faith to speak thus to the wisest of the heathens. The effect?—Some mocked, and others said, "We will hear thee again on this matter." Fatal levity of the light-minded Epicureans! Thrice fatal procrastination of the cold-hearted Stoics!

Then with rapid touch the preacher sketched the analogy between our own times and those of an effete civilization and a city dying of luxury. The love of novelty, to hear and tell some new thing, the frivolity and persistent avoidance of disturbing thought for the future, of retribution for mis-spent time, for misdirected energies, for eyes turned ever away from the problems of life and death and duty. Vashon started. Had this man insight into his very heart? But he listened

hungrily when he went on to sketch the Master's service and the reign of love begun on earth to be perfected in Heaven.

The little congregation filtered out, Vashon sat there still. The preacher passed him on his way out. With sudden impulse he rose, held out his hand which the other grasped.

"Sir, you have brought comfort to the dying."

"Thank God; can I help you?"

"You have helped me, good-bye."

"God be with you!"

Vashon turned away with the man's grasp still warm upon his hands, and his deep-toned earnest words still sounding in his ears. He was strangely comforted, Death and Eternity had lost their terrors. He was surer now.

It was late when he reached home; made his way to the studio, threw himself into a chair and closed his eyes. It had been a long day to him. To those he loved it must have been a restful, happy day. He closed his eyes and conjured up the distant hills, the waving green fields, the golden corn, the summer scents and sounds. Surely the time had come when he might let himself go to the place he so wished to see. Each day the longing to go had grown greater, and with utmost misery he crushed it down. The wish to put off as long as possible the sorrow his coming must bring with it, the desire not to dismay and oppress those others, had held him back, but now surely if ever he meant to go the time had come to do so. To Margaret and Stephen he would tell everything, then bid them good-bye. He would only make a short stay, at most a few hours; and the little girl Roma, he would tell her nothing. The day before he had heard from Stephen who had told him there was much he could say, but could not write; and he had implored him to come and see his finished picture, "The Wings of the Morning."

Vashon wished he could remember the other words

that were linked to these. He tried again and again but could not recall them. • They haunted him, he vainly searched shelves and drawers and cupboards for a prayer book. Then he remembered that locked away in his room there was a box ; it was years since he had opened it. There might be one there. Very gently he lifted the lid and took out a little gold thimble, a handkerchief partly embroidered with his own initials, the last letter still unfinished. Then he took up the picture of a small childish face, and looked long at it.

"Poor little Marjory, poor little sister," he said gently. "I left you all alone, now I am very lonely." He put the picture back again.

Next there came letters written to himself that reached him long after the hand that wrote them was very cold and quiet. Then a packet of the letters he had written her ; his heart ached to see how very few of them there were, and beneath these lay a simple little prayer book, with the name "Marjory Vashon" written in the fly leaf.

The little sister had not failed him.

Vashon bent over the book and hunted till he found the words.

"If I take the wings of the morning : and remain in the uttermost parts of the sea ;

"Even there also shall thy hand lead me ; and thy right hand shall hold me.

"If I say, Peradventure the darkness shall cover me : then shall my night be turned to day.

"Yea, the darkness is no darkness with thee, but the night is as clear as the day : The darkness and light to thee are both alike."

The short summer night settled down upon the earth, the stars pricked their way through the blue vault of the sky, and the moon rose above the domes and spires of the great city, but Neil sat on still watching the vast immensity of space above him, and the

things of this world grew very small viewed in the light of Eternity. •

The next day he opened a letter, "The picture is finished. I am so happy. The days here are as lovely as the dear days at Lucca, not even the plague-spotted flowers could make me think of miserable things. Won't you come back and come quickly. I want you so."

That was all the letter said, but it made his pulses leap, his heart throb dangerously fast. He would go at once, and not tell them of his coming. Perhaps at the very last he might turn coward and flee from the face he yearned to see. •

An hour later he stood on the platform at Paddington.

CHAPTER XXVI

BITTER SWEET

THE sea-gulls came screaming far inland, storm signals from the Atlantic swelling with a dull sullen far-off roar, sure precursor of storm. The gulls, wheeling in a circle, their motionless outstretched wings flashing silver in the sunlight, a dun coloured, huddled-up cloud lurking livid behind the hill crests like a bruise on the blue, and a restless sighing of the tree-tops were, as yet, the only signs of the coming storm. A few rain-drops fell heavily for a moment, but ceased as suddenly as they had begun.

Stephen Printheorpe, standing on the steps of the porch, looked up amazed that they should fall from so clear a sky. Then as he watched a dim veil spread across the day's brightness—a heaviness seemed to fall upon his own heart's happiness, till a small hand was slipped into his.

"You look grave. Say that you are happy."

"My darling, God knows I'm that. But not a minute ago I was thinking that it was hard that I must dissemble, conceal it as if I were ashamed of it."

"'Tis such a little time to wait. Remember that to-day he will have got the letter."

"The letter to Neil. Sweetheart, forgive me. I forgot it. We will wait till he comes. Tell me what you said to him."

"I told him the picture was finished, that the summer days were as lovely as the dear days at Iucca that I was so happy not even the plague-spotted

flowers could make me think of miserable things and I asked him to come back quickly, and if he does, how glad I shall be."

"And if not, then my Roma will give way to me and I will tell Lady Margaret that we love one another, and together we will thank her for her great goodness, and wonder why you were ever afraid of her."

"Yes," said Roma, but she shivered a little; she drew closer to the arm that was round her and longed that she might get the answer most needed to her letter. If he came, though he would never know why the thought of Margaret so fretted her, his presence would make less terrible the strain that must so surely be between her and the woman whose secret each passing hour made easier to read. Then she moved away, for at any moment Margaret might come, and she sighed again at the thought of the spot that showed dark on her sunshine.

But Margaret was nowhere near. Unmindful of the storm cloud fast drawing to it other clouds that clung to it with grim significance, she had walked some distance away, and it was not till the rain drops pattered down, far apart and heavy that she turned towards home; and Printhorpe, catching sight of her afar off, went to meet her. The thought that he was acting an unworthy part in keeping back a thing it was his clear duty to make manifest, interfered with the natural ease and self possession of his manner towards her, while the knowledge that she had protected and given a home to Roma when she was homeless, added to it something that was almost akin to tenderness. Little wonder that Margaret Craven should misinterpret it.

Seeing him coming Margaret stood still, and when he pointed out the darkness hovering over the hills, she thought only of the brightness above it, the hot wind that rocked the trees till they bent and bowed together, that set the corn fields swaying, did not disturb her,

and she turned her look from the frowning clouds to the tiny trickling stream that, escaped from the keeping of the river, sparkled over the stepping-stones and splashed the forget-me-nots that crowded down to meet them. She stooped for the flowers.

Printhorpe gathered them for her—the brightest and bluest that ever a lover gathered for his love.

"Why thank me for them," he said, "are they not all your own? But it seems to me that I am one of those who, having nothing of value to give, are always greedy to take the best."

"Some are giving all the time unconsciously that which is of more value than the deliberately chosen gifts of others."

He laughed at her with a return of the ease of the old companionship.

"That is a Sphinx-like utterance, Lady Margaret, how shall I interpret it?"

"As you please," she answered lightly.

"And if I have the presumption to imagine that I am of the chosen few who scatter these good gifts around them without effort or generosity, am I not pleasing myself all the time? And yet," he moved nearer to her and dropped his voice somewhat unsteadily, "and yet, Lady Margaret, there is a gift greater than all, that I may yet come to your feet in guise of suppliant to entreat."

"It sounds an almost priceless possession. Is it the half of my kingdom?" She laughed a strange shy laugh that trembled.

"The gift I would ask for is greater than the whole of your great kingdom."

He checked himself. His promise! Oh, why had Roma claimed it? Why did she shrink from trusting this woman who surely loved the girl she had befriended, and who would be glad with an elder sister's joy in the happy love of the young thing. She must guess what was in his heart, what his lips longed to utter. He

saw her eyes soften, and her lips quiver. Poor soul, her own love-story had not been so sweet, but it made her tender to the child she sheltered.

"I think you understand," he said, softly.

"Yes, I understand."

A streak of blinding light that tore the sky, and boom of fast following thunder made reply. Instinctively, they moved into the open and caught the sound of terrified sobs coming from a small boy of very plebeian make and pattern, running towards them as fast as his short, fat legs and fright would let him. At a few paces off he stood dismayed one finger in his mouth, his tears for the moment checked. Children had never learnt to smile at the stern-looking mistress on whose soil their fathers had laboured for many a peasant generation. Jimmy, the bell-ringer's grandson, began to sidle away, till another flash and boom made him lose the lesser fear in the greater, and made him fling himself, panic-stricken, upon her, clinging wildly to her skirts and hiding his grimy little tear-stained face in its comforting folds.

It was the first time in all her life that a little child had turned to her in trouble, its clasp thrilled through her. Stooping she put one arm around him and bade him hide his face on her shoulder, lest the flashes of flame should frighten him, telling Printhorpe, who would have relieved her of her burden, that she loved to have and hold him.

"Bless her," he thought, as she pressed her lips to the grubby little hand. "Was she a woman to be feared rather than loved and trusted?" Again he urged that the boy would tire her and put out his arms to take him. But Margaret shook her head, laughed at the thought of being weary and hurried on towards home. Would she ever feel weary again? she wondered. Would she walk through life with this wonderful magical happiness floating around her? The boy might have been a feather, for the heavy weight carried in her

heart for years, had fallen, nothing in comparison would seem to her a burden. Her silence did not affect Printhorpe, who inwardly rejoiced at the knowledge that he had paved the way for Roma, and she knew only that he was close beside her, what need had she of further words, was there not life before them, dear life together?

Her servants stared amazed at the sight of their mistress clasping her arms about one of her dependent's children, and the boy looked with bewilderment about the room into which she brought him. Kneeling before him she kissed his freckled face, and he rubbed away some tears that fell upon it. She talked to him, foolish crooning baby talk, soft words came without command, soft tones and caressing hands to touch him.

Then she held him to the window and bade him see the blue through the rifts in the blackness, that no rain was falling, that the storm was passing. Then at last she let a servant take him to his mother, who marvelled when he spread out his hand to show her his golden treasure.

Margaret leaned against the open window. Tears of sorrow she had shed in plenty. They had washed all the brightness from her eyes; but tears of joy, till now, she had never let fall before. These were so different; there was no scald in them and they eased her heart of its old sorrow. But she wiped them from the precious forget-me-nots that held their blue faces up to her.

Outside a little brown bird sang full-throated, soaring high through the rush of the hot wind, heedless of the unrest around it, seeking no shelter from the storm which had lulled only that it might gather the greater strength for the coming struggle. Margaret listened a while to the little jubilate soaring up to the very gates of Heaven, and her own heart swelled with a sense of thankfulness. With the softening touch of happiness had returned the faith of her childhood. Sorrow had embittered her; joy gave her a new spring of life;

clasping her hands she raised her face to the sky and the words burst from her—

"Thank God."

With mind at rest, peace in her heart, and smiles on her lips Margaret Craven soon afterwards left her room, and with the old instinct very strong upon her, she sought the medium by which she had ever expressed herself. But she paused and hesitated before her organ, for she felt that her touch upon it might betray her thoughts and feelings. How could she check those self-revealing chords, that glad pæan of praise?

Some of Roma's music lay scattered upon the piano. Still hesitating Margaret took up the song that Roma had been singing only that morning. Absurd, she had called it in that first blessed hour when Neil had brought his friend to her and its love words had floated down resonant and clear. Absurd, she had called them, they had irritated and vexed her; now they held a new sweet meaning for her. Was love the key to all the deeper meaning in life?

"Because the birthday of my life is come,
Because my love, my love has come to me"

She said it aloud and softly. There was no one in sight, no one within hearing.

"My heart is like a singing bird
Whose nest is in a watered shoot,
My heart is like an apple-tree
Whose boughs are bent with thick-set fruit."

This she repeated to herself in soft monotone, then, as the music of the words appealed to her, she struck a chord and then another, and at last she sung them in wavering tones, weak with long disuse, uncertain but full of a new intensity.

"My heart is like a rainbow shell
That paddles in a halcyon sea,
My heart is gladder than all these
Because my love is come to me."

Roma passing that way, listened, amazed that Margaret should sing the song she said she hated. Only a curtain divided the ante-room from the music-room, she pushed it aside, and at the sight of her cousin's face her surprise escaped her. •

"Cousin Margaret."

Margaret looked up, flushed scarlet, tried to speak, and was tongue-tied. With swift nervous movement she crossed over to the girl, put a hand on both her shoulders, kissed her, and tried to subdue the intense longing to confide in her this wonderful thing, the human, woman-like longing to make known to one so far above her in every sweet attraction, that she, weary, dull, uncomely creature, had gained a love that might fill the fairest woman with pride in its possession.

A spontaneous kiss from Margaret Roma never before remembered. That look on her face she surely had never seen, that figure confident, and no longer bent with an invisible burden. Joyfully it flashed through her that she had been mistaken; that Margaret's happiness did not hang upon a hopeless thing. Thinking this she had to speak.

"Cousin Margaret, has anything made you glad?"

The elder woman laughed low.

"Has it made me glad that loneliness, black disappointment, dead weight of dust and ashes, has been lifted? That the memory of death itself has been made less terrible? Child, what am I saying? No wonder your great eyes question." Again she kissed her.

"Cousin Margaret, won't you confide in me, won't you trust me?"

"Trust you, yes; but how can I tell you, for my happiness lies beyond all words. Roma, forgive me. Hush, don't speak, but in your heart forgive me for telling you what was not true. I said there was no such thing as love. I, Margaret Craven, told you so, because I tried to believe it myself. And now I tell you that the whole dear world is full of it—full of

love! and that there is nothing, nothing that matters but this love! It is the one thing certain in the Universe. God be good to you, little Roma, and give you too some day the glad possession of such a love as I have won, but it cannot mean to you what it means to me, for life is beautiful to you even without it. It can but make your sunshine brighter, your joy more joyous, your happiness more complete. But to me it has given back faith and hope. I have groped blindly, stumbled helplessly through all the long years of my life, trying to crush my heart that cried for a little joy of living; I, who lived like the Ice Maiden in my ice palace till a beam of sunshine should melt her frozen heart; I have spread out my hands to the warm sun and have felt the ice melt and the coldness slip from me leaving me once more with a woman's heart, warm palpitating and loving. Ah, this gift of love! Not an hour ago he gave it to me. Dear, how you started. Come, stand beside me, look at our two faces in that glass, come closer, dear, put your face beside mine, yours so lovely, mine so sorrow-stricken, weary and worn. Yet, little Roma, I do not envy you your sweet face, for he has chosen me. He who could command the world of women has chosen me out of it."

"I don't understand," said an anxious voice that came from cold lips, and Roma turned away from the reflection of her own face, for the blood was draining away from it.

"Dear, how could you understand a woman who blasphemed. I was forced to hide my love to cloak it, so that none could discover it. He little knew of it, for he hesitated and seemed afraid lest I should think the gift too great he sought. How could he know that I only longed that he might take all, all I had to give. I was standing by the stream and he gathered me these dear forget-me-nots. His words were few, for those who feel the most often say so little, but I knew what the gift was that he sought yet dared not ask for "I

think you understand,' he said gently, and I understood."

"And that was all?" Roma clenched her hands so tight that her nails dug into the soft flesh.

"Yes, but it contented me. Dear child, you have turned so pale, and how cold your hand is! You do not fear that I would be forgetful of you in my happiness? Roma, as long as I live, and you want a home, you will make it with me, with us, ah, that sounds so wonderful, with us, and I will watch and care for you until a lover, if not so beautiful as mine, for that could never be, but a good man and worthy of you gains your love. Roma, guard my secret yet a little while and kiss me, and tell me you are glad for me. Oh child, I have been so lonely and none but God could ever know what made my life so hard to bear."

Brave eyes looked up at her. Soft arms curled round her, young lips touched her so lovingly, and the gold curls, flashing fire lay lightly on the cruel scar.

"God bless you, dear, and give you the happiness you so surely need."

The sound of footsteps separated them.

"Roma, I hear him, I cannot meet him. Not now, not yet. Is it shyness? It is not fear. But I will come back calmer."

Poor foolish feet, they hurried her into the ante-room where she paused to school herself into her wonted calmness. Then she would turn and meet him, the quiet dignified woman as alone he knew and loved her.

"Sweetheart, I feared you were out. Such a storm is coming."

And Margaret Craven heard the voice; heard the relief in it, the love. Heard too the answer.

"Hush! What have you done?"

"My Roma, what is wrong?"

She flung out her hands with a hot and frantic gesture, but he caught and clasped them tightly and with his blue eyes widening with painful wonder, drew her

towards him, then as with all her strength she resisted, some of his patience failed and he let her go.

"Roma, in common humanity tell me what is the matter? Why perplex and alarm me."

"You have seen Margaret. Answer quickly."

"I have, and she was kindness itself. My darling, and is it this that has vexed you. Dear, come to me," he held out loving hands. "Remembering my promise, I said so little and that little she so sympathetically understood. What, my Roma still angry?"

"She understood that you asked for her, that you longed for her, that you loved her. Ah, now I have said it."

"What," cried Printhorpe in harsh rough voice and so great was the horror on his face that it was now her turn to comfort him.

"Dear love," she said in low, broken voice, and stroked her little hand across his forehead, "I could not tell you this before, tell you that she learned to love you. I think it was because I loved you myself so dearly, that I could read the signs that told me she had given all her poor heart to you. But I could not tell you, could not humiliate her, and so I became a coward, and put off the time when she must know that you had given—Oh, what have you done?" In a transport of pain she wrung her hands. "The fault is not yours, it is mine."

"Roma, it cannot be, and yet! Oh my God, what can I do?"

In restless misery he paced the room, then came back to her, and she turned her eyes from the face that was all the world to her lest her joy and pride in it should make her task too hard, then spoke with low steadfast authority.

"You will do nothing. You will leave things as they are now; Margaret shall not be sacrificed. You will put me out of your life and learn to love her."

The silence frightened her; she lifted up her eyes,

saw the steely shafts of anger his own flashed into them. Then in husky, timorous voice she pleaded with him.

"She is so sad, so stern, so different to all other women. Think of it, think of it. We could not deal her this blow. How could I take my joy at her expense?"

Anger, dismay choked the words crowding into his mouth. Wordless silence reigned between them, broken only by the riot without, the storm had burst and passion and pale flame shook heaven.

"What madness," he cried, and his words came forth in passionate utterance. "What is, and where is your love for me that you contemplate handing me over to another, and am I so base a creature as to go? If this is the depth of a woman's love, better far I had never leaned upon it, and God knows I had Neil as warning. Am I some senseless, inanimate thing—a log to be flung in any direction that seems good to you? Roma, am I nothing to you, is your heart as cold as the stone I once thought mine to be? Oh, what have I done?"

In an agony he held her and kissed a face white as the marble of the Cnidian goddess he had once challenged to stir his cold blood, kissed light back to the eyes his hard words had frozen, words to the lips he had silenced.

"Ah, do not doubt my love, Stephen, you cannot. But Margaret, I cannot, cannot humiliate her so. If she had not laid bare her heart to me, with all its past bitterness and its new-found joy, then the sight of our love might sap her very life within her drop by drop as her heart bled silently to death, but she would have never known the bitterness of another's knowing that she had given her love unasked and all in vain. Oh, think of it! She is so proud. She must never know."

"Roma," he said, "I feel in my inmost heart all you say. I would give my life were it not yours too, to save Lady Margaret this awful sorrow. But see, dear, I cannot, will not be a traitor to love. I love you,

sweet, with the first pure strong love of a man's heart. Cannot you see that I should be false to myself, false to you, false even to her? She is worthy of something more than this poor false gift you would bid me lay at her feet. Do you think that it could ever bring her happiness? A loveless marriage is a crime against God and man—it is blasphemy. Oh, love, whatever comes, we must be faithful to each other. Rather than do what you ask me I would die in lingering torture."

A woman, with the wild eyes of one paralysed by a sudden shock, crept away, crept through the house with the stealthy footfall of a thief, out into the thick of the tempest. The driving rain beat down upon her, the lurid forks of light flashed around her, and a rude gust snatched some bruised forget-me-nots from her breast.

But within that room there was silence measured only by heart beats. Roma knew that she had pleaded all in vain, knew too that he was right. But round her mouth were resolute little lines, and Printhorpe seeing them felt his heart sink. Dumbly he watched her draw out and press to her lips the little fateful coin that had first estranged and then drawn them together. Dumbly he held out his arms to her, but she drew no nearer. Her eyes looked out into the gloom of the storm, and when at last she looked at him, it was a look of renunciation.

These moments in a life are the crisis through which the soul passes towards complete development. Choice between good and evil is offered to each one at some stage of existence. The impress is stamped for ever; the soul is higher or lower from that moment. Self-gratification or sacrifice? Poor soul that fails in the supreme decision. *Fais ce que dois, advienne que pourra.*

In that supreme moment of her life, in her steadfast resistance to all that was most alluring, in her divine compassion for the sister woman's sorrow, Roma's soul awoke from the long dream of childhood, and cast from her nature the last trace of heedless and childish triviality.

Watching her very closely, Printhorpe realised in her a greater, nobler spirit than he had ever yet suspected.

At last she turned very resolutely to him. Very bravely she tried to speak, but it was a poor attempt, and her trembling lips showed him the pain that filled her heart.

"Dear love," she said in awed slow whisper, "neither time nor eternity can take or touch my love for you; it is for you always, but I cannot, I will not help to break the heart of the woman who saved me from starvation; God only knows the horrors from which she saved me, and she shall never know that all she longed for, all she thought had come to her, the rest and peace, the beautiful love that took away, she said, all loneliness, bitter disappointment, dust and ashes, that made less terrible the memory of death itself, was given to me, not given to her."

Not all he could say could move her from this resolve. He showed her that it would avail Margaret nothing, but only destroy the happiness of her life and his. She faltered for a moment as she thought of his share in the sacrifice, but the remembrance of Margaret's confidence to her restored her resolution. In his despair his thoughts leapt to the man who would never fail him.

"Roma, tell me, oh quickly, could anyone persuade you otherwise?"

"Unless it were Margaret herself, and she shall never, never know."

"God help us all," he murmured, his face marred by those moments of misery, "for we are beyond the help even of Vashon."

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE WINGS OF THE MORNING.

The storm had passed away. The day dragged wearily to its close for those souls whom the greater tempest had shaken. To all three it seemed as if they had reached an "impasse." Roma sought refuge in her room while the hours slipped away unheedingly over her head. Then came an interval of sheer exhaustion when even her tears could no longer flow. Her mind grew passive as her body; the hopeless reiteration of thought wearied her, her eyes ached with peering out into the impossible future. Everything had come to an end and for ever. No word from her cousin. What could that mean? The agony of suspense was almost more than she could bear.

Printhorpe waited for, and with all his soul dreaded the inevitable meeting with Lady Margaret. But she came not, only a message excusing herself for that evening. Unable to face the farce of a solitary meal he resolved to find relief from the mental strain in physical exertion, and set off on a long tramp through the muddy roads, in the fresh colours left behind in the track of the storm. He lost his way among the Glee Hills and wandered far into the night, returning footsore, mud-stained and weary, going straight to his room, meeting no one on the way.

And Margaret! The long evening hours passed over her in her seclusion, bringing her no comfort, no alleviation. Even the solace of her music was denied her—it would reveal too much. So she sat alone in

the darkness and saw no way out the valley of humiliation.

The sound of approaching wheels roused her. She raised her head. Neil! Yes, he had come back to her, there was relief in the mere thought of his presence. She braced herself for the encounter, and left her own room for the dimly-lighted music-room, where she knew he would come to find her. The sight of the scattered music recalled the foolish gladness of a few hours before, must everything hereafter carry with it a sting for her? She found a seat in dim shade, and there Vashon found her.

The aspect of the house, and its boding silence puzzled and vaguely oppressed him. "I am so happy," wrote Roma in the little missive that had brought him back to her. Where was the laughter and gladness and happiness. No one came down to meet him, and with a heart burdened with fear he sought the music-room.

The organ was silent, far away in a distant corner sat a figure with bowed head and clasped hands, who stirred not at his coming. Could this be Margaret? Then he hurried to her, put his hand on her shoulder. Margaret, this bowed, broken woman with the unseeing eyes and the haggard, drawn face, over which a score of years seemed to have passed since he last saw it, and withered it in passing. She just raised her eyes to his, but showed no pleasure at his presence.

"Margaret dear, I have come back to you, have you no welcome for me?"

With a sigh she turned away, and her hands fell loosely on her lap; he laid his own over them.

"Margaret, speak to me. Say something kind, for I'm sad enough now-a-days and very tired."

Something in his voice roused her. She stood up and looked at him.

"Margaret, you are in some trouble or difficulty. Let me help you."

She turned on him fiercely.

"In trouble? what do you mean?" then her poor pride broke down and she held out her hands to him, such poor, cold appealing hands.

"Oh Neil, help me."

He looked hard, and noted all the changes in her.

"Dear, tell me."

"Not now. To-morrow, yes, to-morrow," she repeated in dull monotonous voice.

"Yes, dear, to-morrow if you wish it, and to-night let me be selfish and do all the talking. I have so much to say to you; come, we will sit over here." He led her to a seat in the window recess.

"Do you want nothing? You are hungry?" she said with a return of her old manner.

"I left word downstairs that I wanted nothing."

"You would like to see . . ."

"No one as yet but you. Tell me, is the child Roma well?"

A sob rose in her throat. She turned her head away.

"She is well."

Vashon sighed.

"I shall be strong again to-morrow, then I shall see her and Stephen," the poor hands twitched in his. "I am so tired now if I see him to-night I shall make a mess of all the things I want to say to him. Dear, I am come down here to say good-bye."

His face expressed nothing beyond the usual strong kindness she had grown accustomed to. His voice did not tremble or falter, but before the significance of his words her own misery retreated; it lay there all the time crouching beside her like the sense of pain under an opiate, but it no longer absorbed her.

"Neil, what do you mean, why do you talk so strangely. Are you going very far away? What has tired you so?"

"Life, Margaret, I think. I want to rest. I am going so far off that I shall never come back. But I

will not beat about the bush. Margaret, old friend, I'm dying, as quick as a man can die. I haven't a chance. In a day, a week—a month at most, the first man told me, and others have said so since. I'll tell you the details to-morrow, we won't bother about them now. No wonder you stare, I don't look much like it, do I?"

"I cannot, will not believe it. Neil, say you are mistaken," she turned to him with desperate appeal. "Say it is fancy, or that whatever is wrong is not incurable."

"My dear, am I given to fancies? I am a man carrying about his death sentence, and little remains of my allotted time limit."

Then she put out her hand and touched him. Touched his face, his hands, his hair with the lingering familiar touch of old comrades. Forgetting herself in the horror of it, she thought only of him, and her own misery and humiliation receded and paled before this new blow. Neil, whose help had never failed her, who in his strong boyhood had played with and protected her not caring that she was such a puny little thing, who had all her life fought her battles; who in all her troubles had guided and helped her—was this old friend going out alone into the unknown? What did Death want with him in his splendid manhood? An exceeding bitter cry broke from her.

"Oh God, oh God!" She clenched her hands and spoke in a savage whisper. "There is no God, only a demon who juggles with the souls of men and women."

"Hush, hush, Margaret, do not say that." A spasm crossed his face, and with strange earnestness he continued, "Think what you are saying. How awful life would be if there were no God."

"Life is awful,"

"Yes, yes, but not in that way. Our poor little plans go wrong, we do not know why, but what right have

we to know? Precious few of us take God into our counsels before we make them. Margaret, I am standing on the brink of the grave, and I tell you there is a God whom we spend our lives trying to forget, while we are feverishly seeking our own poor happiness. Since I received my death warrant a month ago I have been trying to persuade myself that we are all moving from a great darkness behind us to the great darkness before us. I have tried to drown thought and care, and to meet Death with a smile and a sneer. It will not do. Like St. Paul's, my spirit was stirred within me at the idol-worship of our modern Athens. Margaret, dying men speak the truth, and I know that nothing really matters in this world but one thing. This piteous little pageant of our lives is only the threshold of a greater, fuller life, and is given to us that we may feel and grope after God, if haply we may find Him, and gain a vision of the Eternal through the clouds and thick darkness round about Him."

Her eyes were fixed upon his face on which a ray of moonlight rested, with an unearthly radiancy. She thought it was already as the face of an angel. The eyes were as those that had seen a vision, and caught something of what lies beyond the mists of time. And looking at the grave, strong face, she felt herself raised to a level above the world's misery and sorrow. She could look down from above upon the trouble and humiliation that had befallen her. Something of the peace he had attained was shared by her. How near peace lies to each one of us.

"Neil, I too am dazed and tired, and this new shock has stunned me. I long to, but have lost sight of the way to help you."

He spoke again, with long pauses and laboured, panting breath.

"Margaret, it's an awful thing for a soul to stand on the brink of the great unknown beyond and wait till the hand of Death pitches him headlong into the

blackness. The things of this world have a trick of slipping away from one then, and seem paltry and trivial. My time is very short now, Margaret. I came down to say good-bye and to leave in your hands, dear, a little secret and work, that if only I could live I would wish to finish. Margaret, I had thought that I might have made the child you sheltered happy—God knows—perhaps my hands were not clean enough to touch the whiteness of her soul. That is my secret and this is the work, the legacy that I long to leave you. Come out of your box, Margaret, do not shut yourself up from the men and women around you. They have all their cares and sorrows—and if a word from you can help them, don't let any poor soul go through what I have when its hour comes to go out alone. You have a great heart, break through the spell of it, and bring help and sympathy to all in sore need and bitterness. And then I want to say a word or two about Stephen. He'll feel my going most awfully. Will you be good to him? Before I left you all, I noticed,—Margaret, I don't know how to put it, but I think his happiness lies in your keeping." He paused. Would she tell him anything?

But Margaret was silent,—she could not speak. The mystery, the pathos of it all, stirred her heart's depths. She had no thought to put away the task he laid upon her, though the magnitude of the task, how great he little knew, for the moment stunned her. To tell him all now would ease her, but grieve and trouble his spirit. She would withhold it till to-morrow.

"Margaret, will you help me? Will you take up the work just at its poor beginning? It would make me so much happier."

Her soul caught fire at his. At one bound it attained its full stature.

"Yes—God helping me."

"Thank God. Margaret, kiss me."

He bent his head and in the holy moonlight the

woman sealed her vow to the man on whose forehead the death dews were even then gathering.

Standing together they looked out at the white light that the full harvest moon threw down on the earth. His eyes drank in the calm beauty of the night and its peace lapped round him. Her heart still throbbed with the passionate renunciation involved in that one little word. She did not regret it, would never wish to recall it. She had taken the first leap out of herself, that makes it impossible to view life cramped within the narrow bonds of self, and she found unspeakable comfort in the satisfied look that had settled down on his face. She was not an impulsive woman, and had counted well the cost,—the struggle was over,—the real bitterness past for ever.

"Margaret, forgive me if I have traded too much on the privilege of the dying."

"No, no, Neil! Ask me anything, anything."

"I have asked you all, dear—all. Oh, the relief of it! God bless you, dear, for the best woman ever born."

Soon afterwards they separated. He was so strangely tired. She took up her task at once.

Roma started up hot and dishevelled from her pillow as her cousin came in very gently and crossed over to her.

"Margaret, Margaret."

Two arms drew her close. The glorious little head with its tear-stained cheeks was pillowed on a shoulder. No mother could have been more tender.

"Hush, I know all, dear."

"Oh, Margaret, and you still love me."

"Except for not trusting me enough, dear; why should I blame you. Little girl, you have won the treasure of a good man's love. Make him very happy, as, God help me, I would have tried to do. Tell him he should have asked me for you. And tell him that with all my heart I give you. Ah, Roma, do not

fear me any more, it hurts me so, trust me always and love me. Now sleep, dear, and wake up to the new day—the beautiful new day that will come to you.”

Margaret turned and passed softly away.

Alone in his own room Neil Vashon threw open wide the window, drew his chair before it, and looked out into the quiet night. The wind had spent itself and left silence and peace behind it. The tranquillity soothed his spirit and rested his body. He did not think much; his thinking seemed all done. To-morrow he would see Roma and would thank her for calling him back. God bless her, dear, capricious child of the South. To-morrow he would see Stephen. To-morrow would be a good day—to-night he was so tired. He stood up and staggered back again. Oh God, the sword again! the blindness, the confusion. Was this the last dread agony that would ever touch him. Was this Death? He gripped his hands as in a vice together, then stretched them out, clutched hold of the curtain, and set shivering the shafts of light that streamed into the room. One strangled cry, the laboured panting of the hard-drawn, difficult breath, and the beads on his forehead alone testified to mortal agony.

“Thy—right—hand——hold me.”

The light faded from his eyes, the tired heart stopped beating, as the strong soul of Neil Vashon passed out with one last sobbing breath upon the Wings of the Morning.

Day came. Rosy and golden-tipped clouds gathered thickly in the east and floated over the blue. Birds flitted past the open window, and one settled on the window sill. There was nothing in the upright, immovable figure and peaceful face to startle even the

most timid, and it poured forth a full-throated psalm
to the new-born day. •

• And the night shall be filled with music.
And the cares that infest the day
Shall fold their tents like the Arabs,
And as silently steal away. •

THE END.

